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THE HOUSE OF THE SECRET

THE HOUSE OF THE SECRET

(*LA MAISON DES HOMMES VIVANTS*)

BY

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AUTHORIZED TRANSLATION BY

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The House of the Secret

I

THIS day, January 20, 1909, I have decided to set my story down in writing. Dangerous and terrifying the task! But I must perform it. For day after tomorrow I shall be dead. Day after tomorrow. . . . Just two days! And death from old age! Of this I am as certain as a man can be of anything. What, then, have I to lose by speaking?

Speak I must!

That much I owe to the unsuspecting men and women who are to survive me. They are in danger; and I must warn them. . . . Day after tomorrow I shall be safe. Day after tomorrow I shall be dead. . . . And this is my testament and last will, written in my own hand! To all men and women, my brothers and my sisters, I bequeath—a Secret, *the* Secret. May my death serve as a warning to them, one and all! Such is my last will and testament. . . .

Now I am quite in my right mind—let there

be no doubt of that. I am sound, absolutely sound, in mind and, for that matter, in body. I have never known what it means to be sick. But I am old, old beyond human experience of age. How old, I wonder? Eighty? A hundred? Make it a hundred and fifty! It really doesn't matter. I have nothing to decide the question. You might find my birth certificate, papers I may have written, people who may have known me. Such things would not help. Not even my own sensations give me any accurate impression of my actual age. I have been old for such a very few days! I have had no time to grow accustomed to the sudden change. There is no comparison, either, between my absorption of the centuries and ordinary old age—this last, indeed, has never been mine. I became what I am instantaneously, one may say.

I am cold, inside here, in my blood, in my flesh, in my bones. And tired, horribly, unendurably tired, with a fatigue that sleep cannot alleviate! My arms and legs are heavy and my joints are stiff. My teeth are chattering. I cannot bring them together on my food. I struggle to stand erect; but my shoulders stoop inexorably. I am hard of hearing. My eyes are dim. And these infirmities are the more excruciating because they each are new. No living man, I am sure, has ever been quite as miserable as I.

But it will all be over in two days! Forty-eight hours! Two thousand eight hundred and forty-eight minutes! What is a matter of two days? The prospect fills my heart with hopefulness; though death, in itself, is a terrible thing, far more terrible than living men imagine. That I know, as no one else knows. But I am ready! The life I am leading has ceased to be anything resembling life.

So then, I am in my right mind. My head is clear. Furthermore, I am about to die. Two considerations, these, that should dispel all doubt as to my veracity. A man does not lie when he stands on the threshold of Eternity! So I beg of you who find this little book of mine, of all you who read this story of my Adventure—in the name of your God, if you have one, do not doubt me! I am not spinning you a yarn, nor telling you a tale for an idle hour. A great danger hangs over you, over your son, your daughter, your wife, your dear ones! Do not scorn my warning, therefore! Do not shrug your shoulders, or tap your forehead! I am not a lunatic! And death is standing near you! Do not laugh, either. But read, understand, believe—and, then—do as your best judgment dictates.

Forgive me if I write with a trembling hand. The words may seem faint, almost illegible,

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at times. I found a pencil lying in a gutter on the roadside. Its point is dulled, and it is too short for my stiffened fingers. And this paper—from a funeral register—is not of the best. Its broad black border leaves very little space and compels me to cramp my lines. A broad black border! How inconvenient! Yet how appropriate! This funeral page is perchance the best for such a story as mine!

Here I begin. And again I beg of you; doubt me not, but read, understand, believe!

II

IT all started with a letter from Colonel Terrisse, commander of field artillery, to Vice-Admiral de Fierce, commander-in-chief of the Western Mediterranean, prefect of the Maritime reserve, line-officer, and governor of the fortress of Toulon. The letter in question came in to Staff Headquarters by the evening mail of Monday, December 21, 1908. Notice now! That was the twenty-first of *last* December. It is now the 20th of January, 1909. Not quite a month ago! It will be a month tomorrow, day for day. A month! One single month! Gods of Heaven and Hell!

The Colonel's letter reached Headquarters by the evening mail—military headquarters, you understand, not the naval. At Toulon, as is the case with similar stations, the vice-admiral in command functions in a double capacity as maritime prefect and military governor. His residence is the mansion of the prefecture; while his adjutant occupies the governor's house. There are thus separate offices communicating by telephone. The wire is for obvious reasons a private one, independent of the city "central."

I was in the officers' room when the mail came in; and I opened the letter. Among my duties was that of reading and sorting the correspondence of the military commander. I was a captain of cavalry detailed to the General Staff. I was young—just thirty-three—thirty-three, mark you! And that was less than a calendar month ago! Four weeks and two days ago, to be exact.

I opened the letter; and read it. It was a matter of no great interest that I could see. I am going to transcribe it textually, however, for I can see it right before me now.

XVth Army Corps

FORTRESS OF TOULON

Toulon, Dec. 21, 1908.

Corr. No. 287

Re: Broken Telegraph Wires

Vice-Admiral Charles de Fierce,
Commander-in-Chief of Western Mediterranean,
Headquarters, Navy Yard, Toulon.

Sir:—

I have the honor to report that telegraph poles Nos. 171, 172, 173, 174, 175 are down as the result of a wash-out occurring on Dec. 19th last, and that, in consequence, the Tourris-Grand Cap line is out of commission.

I have issued the necessary orders for repairs. In view of the heavy rains and the long distance the repair crew will have to cover over muddy roads, it

is probable that the poles cannot be in place again under forty-eight hours. All communication by wire between Toulon and Grand Cap will accordingly be impossible for that length of time.

I have the honor to be, sir,

Your Obedient Servant,

TERRISSE,

Colonel-in-Command of Field Artillery.

I need not observe that, in peace times, Toulon and the Grand Cap have nothing of importance to say to each other, with the single exception of days when there is target practice. The Grand Cap is one of the mountains in the chain east of Toulon. It is a bold, forbidding pile of rock, crowned with a modern and fairly strong battery. Ordinarily the place is held by a corporal's guard, a full garrison being stationed there only during periods of manœuvre. The country around the mountain is a rough uncultivated heath virtually uninhabited. Charcoal burners camp there from time to time; but there are no farms nor permanent settlements. The wire leading to that God-forsaken place could be down for more than two days without the world's coming to an end on that account! I was intending to file the colonel's letter and let it go at that, when the telegraph corporal knocked at the office door.

"A call for you, Captain," he said, "from Naval Headquarters!"

"I'll be there directly," I replied.

As I rose from my chair, I chanced to look at the clock over the fireplace.

It was three P.M., to the minute.

I stepped down the corridor to the telephone booth, which was in the adjoining room.

I took up the receiver.

The voice calling me by name over the wire, was, as I recognized to my surprise, that of Vice-Admiral de Fierce, himself.

"Hello! That you, Narcy!"

"At your service, Admiral!"

"Barras tells me you have a horse down at Solliès-Pont. Is that right?"

"Quite so, Admiral. I left my bay down there, last night."

"What condition is he in? Pretty good?"

"Excellent! Hasn't worked for some days. I was intending to use him tomorrow, for the inspection at Fenouillet."

"Splendid! However, the inspection at Fenouillet is off. But I've got a dirty job to attend to; and I don't see anybody handy except you."

"Quite at your service, Admiral!"

"Good! . . . You know the wire is down between here and the Grand Cap?"

"I just received a letter to that effect from Colonel Terrisse."

"Now that's a nuisance, just at this moment.

The guard up at the battery there must be informed at all hazards that the seventy-fives will be working over at Roca-Troca tomorrow."

"Tomorrow, Admiral?"

"Yes, firing starts at noon. We can't put it off, because General Felte must get away from Toulon tomorrow night at the latest. They're going to shell the approaches to the mountain; and we've got to warn any wood-choppers there may be in the neighborhood. Otherwise somebody will be getting hurt! What time is it now, Narcy?"

"Three five, Admiral."

"How far do you make it, from here to Solliès-Pont?"

"Ten or twelve miles."

"Good! Well, telephone your orderly . . . you have a man down there, haven't you? . . ."

"Yes, Admiral!"

" . . . tell him to get your horse ready and bring it to you somewhere along the road. . . Are you in uniform?"

"No, Admiral, military regulations permit civilian after luncheon as you know. I am wearing a riding suit, however, with boots and spurs. I was thinking of trying out Colonel Lescaut's new mare this afternoon."

"Fine! I'll send my car over to get you in five minutes. My man will drive you down to

Solliès-Pont, and you'll be there by 3:40. There's no way of going on by auto, is there?"

"To the Grand Cap? Impossible, Admiral. Even Valaury is difficult for wagons."

"You know the way?"

"I think so. I went over the ground once last year, during evolutions. Beyond Valaury you have to take a trail, a sort of mountain road."

"But a horse can do it?"

"It was on a horse that I went there."

"Very well, then. Try to make it. But the Grand Cap is a good hour and a half beyond Solliès-Pont, and it gets dark at five. You understand that?"

"I'll spend the night up on the Cap, of course."

"Yes. And it won't be so bad. There's an officers' building there with good beds. The guard will fix you up. And you can come back in the morning. Sorry to give you a job like this, Narcy. But I don't just see any other way out of it. We've got to get word to the people there. I had thought of sending a car around, by way of Revest. But just our luck! The road is torn up all the way from Ragas to Morière. The simplest thing is for someone who knows the road to ride out from Solliès-Pont. And you seem to be the only man in sight."

“Glad to be of use, Admiral. Your car is here now. I hear the engine out in the yard.”

“Be sure to telephone your man at Solliès-Pont.”

“The corporal will do that for me. I’m off without losing a second’s time!”

“And ever so much obliged, eh, Narcy? Call and see me when you get back!”

I hung up the receiver. The telegraph corporal was standing outside the booth with my water-proof and my soft felt hat. A misty rain was falling outside.

I hurried back into the office, gave a turn at the combination on the safe, and locked the cabinet for the correspondence files. This latter operation wasted a good half minute. The lock was out of order and refused to turn. After some cursing on my part, it yielded to the key.

Through the white lace curtains hanging over the office windows a bright, though grayish light was streaming in from the waning afternoon. The stove was glowing red, giving the room a touch of cosiness that I was to exchange with some regret for the raw damp outside.

On the table I noticed Colonel Terrise’s letter, which, in my haste, I had forgotten to file. I thought of opening the cabinet again. But no, that would take too much time. Not knowing what else to do with the letter, I folded it and

slipped it into the inside pocket of my waistcoat.
. . . That is why I can see it now!

In the courtyard of Headquarters a hostler was currying the adjutant-general's mare. He spat out the stub of his cigar and saluted me. In the west, a dim outline of the sun was visible through a thin place in the clouds. A tree nearby was dripping with great drops of moisture. The swinging of the outer gate rang a bell in the sentinel's box. I remember that a dog, sleeping inside, raised his head lazily and looked up.

Beside the curbing on the street, the Admiral's auto was standing, its sixty horse-power motor purring softly but powerfully. I opened the side door and stepped in. . . .

We were off!

III

AT the corner of Rue Revel and the Place de la Liberté we skidded as the chauffeur turned sharply to avoid a child playing just off the sidewalk.

We slowed down along the Boulevard de Strasbourg on account of crowded traffic. I was shaken up as we stopped short under the Porte Notre Dame to prevent collision with a truck.

We sped along through the Faubourg de Saint-Jean-du-Var between two rows of tall narrow houses propped one against the other. Every three quarters of a mile we passed a trolley car. Some workmen were repairing the road under the railroad bridge. They had to jump to get out of our way; but a train passing overhead drowned the curses they sent after us.

It had stopped raining; but the road was still wet and slippery. The gray sky seemed to reach down and touch the roofs of dark tiling. Not a ray of sunshine brightened the landscape, depressing under the best conditions, but ghastly now under that mournful light.

We reached the outskirts of the settled region. One straight unbroken line of mud, the road

reached out into the foggy heath. Here now to the left the foot-hills of the Faron were rising one above the other. I leaned out over the running board to get a good look at the top of the mountain. A thick bank of fog was hiding it from view. That was bad! The Grand Cap was higher still. I might have some trouble in groping my way along, and I might easily take the wrong trail. Yes, that was something to think about. . . . Though it worried me only for an instant.

The village of Valette, the first town outside Toulon in the direction of Nice! We were making forty miles an hour. Children scampered this way and that to get off the road ahead of us, screaming at the top of their voices. I looked at my watch. It was twenty-six minutes past three. I pulled the wind shield down and nudged the chauffeur with my elbow.

“We can speed her up, now, eh, till we get to the bad road?”

“Yes, Captain.”

The auto lunged ahead at a fifty-mile clip. The macadam lay straight and level ahead of us. Here was the hamlet of La Garde, perched on its hill-top around its dilapidated castle. The train of thought was quite involuntary—but these ruins brought back to my memory a woman’s face—the face of Madeleine, Madeleine

de . . . I almost betrayed her name . . . whom I had met just a year before in those self-same ruins.

The old walls stood out with their battlements cut clean against the darkening sky. The plain below was a naked, leprous tangle of stupid olive-trees. . . . But that day, I had crossed the courtyard of the castle; and, I remembered, behind the tower I had spied the slender, agile form of a woman. She was a sight-seer, probably, resting for a moment on the top step of the stairway leading to the old postern. My heels clacked on the pavement, and she looked around my way—a dazzling vision of greenish golden hair, with eyes of emerald.

Madeleine. . . . How endlessly, limitlessly far away all those days now seem! But they are so remotely past for me, alone. That woman is still alive . . . still young . . . still beautiful. Indeed it were indiscreet to give even the four syllables of her name. But there are so many Madeleines in the world—Madeleines even with hair of greenish gold and emerald eyes!

Still at fifty miles an hour we swept into and through the village of Farlède. A mile or two ahead the first houses of Solliès-Pont were coming into view.

I looked at my watch. Three thirty-nine! At three forty, to a second, we reached the turning

where a road makes off from Solliès-Pont to Aiguiers and thence toward the Grand Cap. My orderly was waiting there, holding my horse playfully by the nose. We stopped so short that I struck hard against the wind-shield with my chest.

A moment later I was in the saddle.

Some women of the village sat looking at me with interest from their door-steps. They thought the speed of my arrival and the suddenness of my departure were a bit suspicious. I remember hearing one of them remark in a shrill Provençal dialect:

“Anyhow it’s not the kind of weather for a dress parade . . . no girls are out!”

I believe those were the last words I heard that day . . . that day, which was the last day of my life, really. . . .

IV

I TOOK the Aiguiers road. The going was good—not too slippery, not too hard. My horse was trotting cheerfully along, at an easy swinging canter.

He was a fine animal and I loved him—a perfect Arles thoroughbred, high in the withers, short in the cropper, with a fine spread of neck and shoulders. A courageous fellow, too, and so good-natured! I had picked him out at my leisure and just to my taste, during a turn of duty at the ministry in Paris. There you have facilities for such things that officers in garrison never dream of . . . I called him *Siegfried*. We had come to know each other very well; and, in all our intimacy as comrades, I never discovered a defect in him worth mentioning.

Siegfried took me to Aiguiers without stopping once for breath. Aiguiers is a little cluster of houses backed up against one of the last foot-hills of the Maurras chain. Beyond there, the road began to get more difficult. It ran along a hillside above a ravine cut deep by the Gapeau. There were sharp turns conforming to the twists in the bed of the little torrent,

where the water mirrored gray with the pallor of the leaden clouds.

It now began to rain again, in huge drops that made visible circles in the silent pools of the stream. I suggested a gallop to Siegfried. Away off to the right, the bell-tower of Solliès-Toucas pierced a clump of cherry trees. Then the road turned sharp to the left hiding the distant village from view. Now there was nothing ahead but a deserted country, on which the sky was raining in a thick, dispiriting drizzle.

Halfway up a steep fold in the ground, Siegfried slowed down to a walk. The other side was a more gradual slope, the inner rim of the great bowl of Valaury—a sort of crater, half filled, and perhaps two miles in diameter. Now the Grand Cap, hitherto concealed by the Maurras ridge, was in plain view. It came forward, as it were, out of the rain, sullenly dominating all the smaller hills around it. But its peaks were quite invisible, lost in the ceiling of clouds. It was nothing but a truncated cone, a huge pillar propping up the leaden architecture of mist and sky above it. Stray flecks of fog were wandering here and there along its sides, drifting slowly down to the break between the heath and the farm lands. For a second time the danger of going forward into that thick and sticky gloom occurred to me. Even if I found the trail,

it might be hard, if not impossible, to keep to it. . . . But, for the moment, the floor of the basin was clear and the path before me broad and level. A word to Siegfried and he joyfully resumed his gallop.

Madeleine had often gone with me on early morning rides. There in the pine groves, which drape the Points of Cépet and Sicie in gorgeous green, we would trot along side by side inhaling the cool, resinous air. The memory came to me at just this moment; for the evening breeze was rising and I had breathed it deeply in. It felt damp and musty to my lungs, polluted with a strange odor of rotting leaves and oozing ground. I straightened up in my saddle for a deeper breath, a keener sense, of the uncanny smell. Yes, it was the same as before—and the queer notion came to me that it was the breath of the mountain, close, cadaverous, nauseous. A creeping, disagreeable chill ran over me!

Siegfried, meanwhile, was galloping on; but in a moment or two I reined him in. We were well across the bowl, and the other slope, steep and slippery, was before us. At the top of a knoll four huts were gathered in jumbled array. No one seemed to be living in them, but a dog came out and sniffed at Siegfried's heels, without, however, barking.

We came to a fork in the trail. I stopped to

consult my military map and get my bearings. Straight in front of me, the Grand Cap blocked the horizon with a formidable chaos of precipitous rocks. Its first foothills were perhaps a mile and a half ahead. Now this was East; so North would be on my left hand. I studied the map for a while. It was not so very clear, but I did make out the fork where I then was standing and the two paths between which I had to choose. So far as I could see, they both led up to the battery; the one to the right, by way of the old convent of Saint Hubert and the village of Morière-la-Tourne; the one to the left, through the hamlet of Morière-les-Vignes and Morière itself. I decided to take the latter route.

Had I selected the other, Adventure doubtless would have missed me!

As I went on again, I thought I could make out a sort of pinkish cast to the clouds heaped up along the mountain. I was headed west now. That radiance must be, therefore, a shaft from the setting sun making its way through the bank of mist and fog. Before long it would be pitch dark. Instinctively, I looked back to the eastward, better to gauge the approach of night; and frank uneasiness came over me as I thought of the long distance still to go. Darkness, indeed, had already settled on

the plains. It was climbing the heights of Solliès, engulfing the basin of Valaury, and striding rapidly, stealthily, along up the mountain trail behind me. Now it was passing us, reaching the dangerous slopes of the mountain far ahead. The path was barely perceptible, and Siegfried kept slipping alarmingly.

For the first time, I clearly realized that my mission involved far greater risks than an uncomfortable night of wandering out in the cold and rain.

V.

IT must have been somewhere on the northernmost spur of the Maurras range that I lost my way. It was not yet night, exactly, but it was far from broad daylight. The trail seemed to come to an end in a tangled clump of bushes, that looked like all the other underbrush on the solitary heath. Siegfried went courageously in, however, slipping about, but shrewdly feeling the ground with a forefoot before he rested his weight upon it. I relied mostly on his instinct to determine what was path and what was heather. Unfortunately I had forgotten that at the northern tip of the ridge the Tourris trail makes off to the left from the route to the Grand Cap. I should have remembered this, I suppose; for the Tourris trail makes a well-known tramp from Toulon—up to the famous Col de la Mort de Gauthier. Strangely significant name!

My horse turned off on that trail, a fact of which I was not at once aware, because I had not even noticed the fork when we came to it.

If the path hitherto had been bad, it now became positively dangerous. The ground was

rough, broken by boulders and ledges and with deep ravines and rain-courses. We had left the rolling knolls about the basin of Valaury and were skirting the first rocky escarpments of the mountains. Siegfried went down on his knees a number of times. Meanwhile long streamers of cloud kept reaching down from the ceiling of mist above us, a ceiling that was closer and closer to our heads as we reached the higher land. Eventually we found ourselves in a sort of transparent, almost luminous, haze, which I knew was the forerunner of the bank of thick fog I had been watching as it drifted along some thirty feet above our heads.

“Provence always was a dirty hole!” I swore, as I well remember.

But at just this moment, the trail, if trail it could be called, took a sharp descent. Now we should have been going up-grade all along, and this sudden drop surprised me. Nothing of the kind had been indicated on my chart. I thought for a moment of consulting the map again, but the annoyance of unfolding the unwieldy paper and of studying in such wretched light all that maze of ditches and indentations deterred me. Besides, the drop soon came to an end and we were going uphill again, across a sort of hollow thickly overgrown with brush. The path was now a thing of the past decidedly. We were

in a thicket of cat-briar which scratched Siegfried's belly and sides and cut my hands as I tried to keep the nettles off my own face. I could not get a good look at the ground, so thick was the undergrowth, but I observed that Siegfried was advancing with greater and greater reluctance. That much was evident. He did not like this going blindly into a territory where he scented danger.

Now there was another sharp drop followed by a third up-grade.

This convinced me that I was certainly off the road. I had been crossing a sort of saddle with three humps in line. No such ground figured on the trail to the Grand Cap. I thought I would keep on, however, to the top of the next rise. From there, perhaps, I could get a look around.

And it turned out as I had hoped.

From the top of the grade ahead, I could see a broad plain shut in on all sides by mountains. These were lost in the distance; but even in that heavy weather their outlines were characteristic enough. This massive barrier to the West could be nothing but the Faron—the “Sleeping Dog” as it is sometimes called from its unusual contour. Over here was the Coudon, just as surely; there was no mistaking its eastern spur, sharp-pointed like the prow of a

vessel cutting into the plain. Where was I then? There could be no doubt. I had made the summit of "Walter's Death" itself! So then, I must hurry back, and make as good time as possible! I must try to find the fork where I had gone astray and take the trail that went out to the right from there. Time was an important matter. I might still have a half hour left before complete nightfall.

Siegfried was loathe to plunge back into the maze of cat-briar from which we had just so painfully emerged. His nose had been scratched in a number of places. I pressed my knees into his sides to intimate that speed was a consideration. Pluckily he went back down the incline, and at the bottom, indeed, he broke into a trot.

And he trotted on—but not for long.

Just before we were reaching the second grade, I suddenly felt my saddle give way beneath me. I fell, and so did Siegfried. I remember the rough scratch of the brambles as I shot through them and the thud with which I struck on a stone. I lay stunned for the fraction of a minute; then I jumped to my feet, bleeding, bruised, torn, but unhurt, all in all. Not so with Siegfried! I knelt beside my poor, poor horse. His left forefoot had caught in a crevice between two stones, and his leg had snapped like a pipe-stem at the ankle. Never again would

Siegfried take me on my morning gallop! Never would he leave that fatal gully into which he had gone so much against his will!

I wept.

We men of the cavalry think more of our horses than we do of our friends and of our lovers. I wept! But then, in a sort of reaction to cold brutality, I drew my revolver, pressed the muzzle into Siegfried's ear, closed my eyes, and fired. The noble body trembled for a brief second; then it lay limp and relaxed under that shroud of bush and cat-briar.

Coldly, mechanically, I returned my pistol to its place. Then I walked away, up toward the top of the second hill, where I sat down on the first stone I came to.

A quarter of an hour must have passed before I came really to myself and thought of considering the plight in which I found myself.

It was not an enviable one! Here I was, on foot, well off any beaten trail, virtually lost in the most lonesome waste of the mountains of Provence. I had passed a deserted hut some four miles back on the road. The battery on the Cap must be fully seven or eight miles further on beyond the fork. And my duty it was to get there regardless of my helplessness in that impenetrable thicket, from which twilight was rapidly fading now, yielding to black night.

VI

A GAIN I beg of you who read me. . . . Believe! Believe! Believe!

I was seated on a stone, to one side of what I took for the path. My eyes turned down toward the hollow from which I had just come—the place where the body of my horse was lying. Then I looked in the other direction, over toward the first hump of the double saddle of three hills. I was intending to rise and start out on my way again. It was my duty. . . . I was in honor bound to make the summit of the Grand Cap, find the battery, deliver my dispatch.

Suddenly, on the hill-top—the first one—it could not have been more than a hundred yards away, I perceived a human form, standing out in dark profile against the still livid sky. I say it was a human figure. It was that of a woman, and she was coming toward me at a rapid pace.

In joyous surprise I sprang to my feet. Certainly this was the last thing on earth I could have hoped for in such a place and at such an hour. Even in daytime it is rare to find a peasant, a wood-chopper, or a hunter in the neighborhood of the *Mort de Gauthier*! There

are no trees worth cutting on those barren mountain sides. There are no fruits nor berries, nor even game. Yet here on this cold, rainy, foggy night I was meeting a woman—the only woman, as I was willing to bet, who had been along that trail in a month's time. Somebody from Valaury or Morière, probably, hurrying to get home by nightfall. She would be well acquainted with the region, doubtless, and would be only too glad to set me right about the trails.

I took two or three steps in her direction, observing, however, that she would pass right in front of me, in any case! How fast she was coming, too! How easily she managed all that rough uneven ground!

She was now some twenty yards away. And I stopped in utter stupefaction!

She was not a peasant girl, by any means. That dress! It was of a fashionable cut, such as a society woman of distinction might wear. An afternoon otter cloak, edged with ermine, in the latest style; a large loosely hanging muff, of ermine also; a turban hat with plumes, the latter lying flat and pasted to the crown by the rain and mist. She had no umbrella and no heavier coat. There was nothing about her that seemed probable in that wilderness. I glanced in panic around me to be sure I was indeed in

the foothills of those mountains and not in the winter-garden of some fashionable hotel on the Blue Coast; that it was the same desert in which I had lost my way, and that it was a cold, raw, rainy night of December.

I could scarcely breathe now, and a cold chill began to run up and down my back.

Was it not an apparition?

Perhaps, but no ordinary apparition at any rate! Here was no impalpable, supernatural body. For I could hear the crunching of her feet on the leaves, a slight squeak in her shoes, and the silken rustle of her garments as they brushed against the brambles.

The woman came up to me, passed me, barely grazing my body. She was looking fixedly ahead, without stopping, without turning her eyes this way or that. I had first a front view of her features, then another in profile. I recognized her! It was she!

“Madeleine!”

The cry came from me involuntarily, a cry of terror absolute:

“Madeleine!”

The woman seemed not to hear, just as she had seemed not to see. She walked rapidly past and away down the trail into the underbrush of the hollow.

VII

MADELEINE, Madeleine de . . .

But no. I must not write her name!

I had met her the year before—that would be year before last, the year 1907. It was the month of May, I believe, but of that I cannot be sure. It seems so long, long ago, such a frightfully long, long, time ago! My memory is faltering like a waning candle flame flickering above its last drop of molten wax, sputtering with bursts of blue and yellow light as it is about to die out!

So then, the month of May, in the year 1907. . . . At this moment, a clearer flash of my memory comes—I see everything as vividly as I lived it then.

It was in the courtyard of the castle at La Garde. I had strolled up the winding path to the ancient ruins; and behind the tower of the old donjon, I found . . . Madeleine sitting on the last step of the stairway leading up to the postern. She turned at the sound of my footsteps and she blushed. That blush told me I had intruded on a very personal, a very intimate,

reverie. At our feet stretched the leprous plain and beyond the southern limit of the plain, the sea. A radiant sky, not a trace of vapor veiling the glare of the naked sun! The ugly plain caught fire from the rain of light, became beautiful for a moment. It was one of those golden days, when the chest can scarcely contain the exultant throbbing of a drunken heart!

When my eyes fell on the greenish golden hair of Madeleine, my heart began to throb intoxicated. When her emerald eyes fell on me, my bosom heaved with an inner, ecstatic joy.

Later we knew that that instant had been the beginning of our love; for Madeleine confessed to me that a deep mysterious thrill had moved her also, at sight of my own enthralling emotion. . . . And the incredible horror of it all! That was not quite two years ago. And this hollow bag of crackling bones was I, I, a young, strong, hopeful man, loved and in love! Less than two years ago!

Sometime later: a *fiesta* at a sumptuous country house, looking down on the sea! Precipitous promontories, into which the maritime fir trees shot their roots and hung out horizontally above the foaming surf! Paths winding in and out among the trees—and lanterns, lanterns everywhere, shedding a soft and mellow light about the groves!

There I saw Madeleine a second time!

An evening gown of cloth-of-silver, cut low over splendid shoulders; and my eyes lingered on them with imperious desire!

We met by a balustrade hanging out over the sea. The subdued murmur of the breakers softened the echo of our voices. In the distance the wail of violins! Other couples walking to and fro on the path behind us! A man and woman came up to our terrace, broke the silence of our communion, went away again!

We talked of indifferent things—the small change of conversation, withholding words of deeper import. We sat there for a long time. One by one the lanterns burned themselves out. A red oval moon came up out of the sea, reached out along the water in the outline of a glistening, elongated cypress tree. The violins fell silent.

We walked back toward the villa.

Madeleine rested a cold hand on my arm. A sudden exaltation came over me. That woman whom I had so passionately loved under the hot sunglow of an afternoon was now at my side. We were alone in that pine grove, alone under that moonlight!—I threw an arm about her shoulders, drew her toward me, and pressed my lips to her lips in a kiss she did not avoid.

This was less than two years ago! It is Hell to remember it now!

VIII

MADELEINE was a vivacious creature. Her graceful, subtle, intelligent beauty was not coarsened by the ruddy vitality of her features and the warmth of passion evident in the Southern blood that raced through her blue veins. I must not linger on these impressions, however; they are of interest only to me. I am not writing a diary of my inner life! I am not writing my memoirs! This is a testament, in which I bequeath to the generations after me a Secret which it behooves all men and women, my brothers and sisters, to know. It were better, perhaps, to abbreviate my story, suppress everything not pertinent to that Secret. But I must convince the sceptical. The voice of Truth must be felt in every word I say. I must show myself to be really the man I pretend to be: Charles André Narcy, captain of cavalry, Distinguished Service Cross, detailed to Staff Headquarters, born in Lyons, April 27th, 1876, died at Toulon, December 21, 1908 (or January 22, 1909). That I am this person I can prove only by this story. What desperation! Only by this story! I must convince you by the de-

tailed fullness of my account. And in this sense, everything, everything, has a bearing on the Secret.

Now I must say that Madeleine was a beautiful, vivacious creature, plump with the healthy vigor of her Provençal race. And as I took her in my arms for the first time, I noted what a firm, solid, *heavy* person she was.

Later, when once I took her in my arms again and playfully lifted her from her feet, she seemed to me much *lighter*, much *lighter*!

Madeleine de X . . . What horror! If only I could give her name! Then you would know! And she would confirm my story! However . . . honor impels me at this point to evade a little, to falsify a number of dates, and places, and details. You must get the meaning of what I say; but what does it matter if I write "June" instead of "October," or "Tamaris" instead of "Hyères," "taxicab" instead of "Peuchot." I must be careful, all the more because from moment to moment the flame of my memory is weakening, trembling, threatening to go out, reviving again only after minutes of anguish! The flame of my memory, and the flame of my intelligence, also! If I am not on my guard, some word, blighting to a lady's honor, may escape me!

She was the only daughter of a rich man! He

was a hard, sour, ill-tempered fellow. During winter seasons he lived in a decrepit castle lost in the chalk dunes between Toulon and Aubagne. There he kept aloof from the world, receiving no visitors and making no calls himself. One of those domestic tragedies, as laughable in the eyes of society as they are torturing to the hearts they tear, had separated him from his wife some twelve or fifteen years before. The old folks in Toulon, Nice, Marseilles, used to refer amusedly to the story, which they considered a most savory scandal. I never had an appetite for such things. I am unable to tell exactly why that man and that woman separated! I was never a friend of either of them. I saw him occasionally, in the old days, at our officers' balls. His wife I used to meet from time to time at various resorts along the Riviera. She had a luxurious villa at La Turbie and another at Beaulieu. Part of the year she lived on her own properties; another part in Paris; usually she spent two or three months with Madeleine in Toulon, for there her daughter married and settled permanently.

In the summer months, Madeleine lived in a cottage of her own on Cépet Point, where the peninsula juts out into the roadstead and is always exposed to a cool breeze. Inspections often took me to the batteries in that neighbor-

hood, and I had occasion for many a delightful promenade in the groves and forests of Cépet and Sicie. I would ride up on horseback with an orderly, who came on the horse that Madeleine was to ride. We kept a side-saddle for her in the sentry box at one of the customs' houses. . . . If you want details, there you have plenty of them. However. . . .

I have figured it out: It was in the month of May, of the year 1907, that I met Madeleine for the first time at the old castle at La Garde; it was in the month of June of the same year that I encountered her for the second time at the *fiesta*; it was two or three weeks after that when I first took her in my arms and lifted her from her feet.

And, she was a heavy person, robust, solid, well-built, but *heavy, heavy!*

Some two months later, when we were playing on a beach, it occurred to me to take her in my arms and lift her again. I turned all my muscle to the task and prepared for the strain I so well remembered. To my surprise she was *light*, as *light* as a feather, strangely, surprisingly *light!* I carried her about in my arms without effort. And she had been such a *heavy* person!

IX

THE dying flame of my memory burns up here into a brighter light. I remember the following with a strange, besetting vividness.

As Madeleine rose from the sand some straws and bits of earth clung to her skirt, and I brushed them off. Under the trees that bordered the shore, our horses were browsing at some leaves, and I still can hear the crumpling sound as they chewed them. To get back into the saddle, Madeleine rested a foot in my hand; and again I had that sensation of her extraordinary *lightness*. I looked up at her in some alarm.

As we rode along, I finally asked concernedly:

“My dear, have you been quite well these days past?”

She seemed surprised at the question:

“I?”

“Why yes, you! You seemed rather tired, I thought!”

She opened her handbag, produced a beauty-box and looked into the tiny mirror that was on its cover. Then she laughed:

“What can you be dreaming of, silly! You

quite frightened me! But my skin is as rosy as a milkmaid's!"

That was true. The exhilaration of the drive had brought the ruddiest glow to her cheeks. She brushed them over with her powder puff, however. I might well have accepted the explanation, but a feeling of uneasiness came over me. Might there not be strange diseases that eat out the vitality of a person without changing appearances of perfect health? Certain fevers bring rosiness and not pallor to the features!

I had not seen Madeleine for nearly a week just previous. She usually told me all she did. Perhaps she had been tiring herself in some way or other:

"What have you been doing, love, since I saw you Tuesday?"

"Since Tuesday?" she repeated with some hesitation.

"Ho!" said I, "What a memory! Yes, since Tuesday, to be sure!"

"Oh, yes! . . . It would be easier to remember if there were anything in particular," she replied. "I have done nothing at all, stupid! Oh yes, that's so! I did go into town once! That was Thursday!"

"And without telling me you were to be there, where I could have seen you?"

She turned toward me and stared, with a cer-

tain perplexity, as one looks on discovering in the mind a thought, or a memory, one had never dreamed of finding there. She repeated my exclamation with an interrogative inflection:

“Without letting you know?”

She looked dreamily down over the mane of her horse. Then she resumed.

“That’s true! I didn’t let you know!”

And she blushed in the most evident perplexity and confusion. I was quite amused; and I went on:

“And I suppose you had a date with somebody . . . somebody whose company was far more alluring than that of your old friend perhaps! . . .”

She passed a hand across her forehead, as though to collect her thoughts; once, twice she did this. And I noticed that where her four fingers pressed upon her marble skin, four ruddy spots appeared.

“Did I see someone?” she asked. “Whom did I see?”

She asked the question quite innocently in a sort of dreamy reverie. I raised my voice in mock severity, the way one calls a child to order:

“‘Whom did I see!’ How should I know, dearie, whom you saw? I was asking you?”

She started imperceptibly, and then quite changing tone and manner, she resumed:

“Oh, I made a mistake . . . Thursday! I didn’t go into town, Thursday! It was Tuesday, and I took the train . . . for Beaulieu!”

“I see . . . so your mother is at Beaulieu again. You paid her a visit?”

“Nonsense! Mother is at Aix! This is September, you see!”

“Why Beaulieu, then?”

“Why Beaulieu?”

Again she seemed to have lapsed into a dream. As she answered, her lips quivered and each word came out with an effort that was noticeable.

“Because . . . why yes . . . I had some errands to do there. . . . I went to Beaulieu. . . . In fact . . . see for yourself . . . !”

She dropped the reins and began looking through the little bag that was hanging from her wrist.

“See . . . here is my ticket . . . !” she added triumphantly.

I was quite puzzled, less at the fact of her visit to Beaulieu than at her whole manner. And my astonishment was not relieved when I observed that the ticket had been punched but once.

“You got on the train—that is evident! But

how do you happen to have the ticket, anyway? How did you get through the gate without giving it up?"

Her eyes turned toward me vacantly, wide open, almost bulging:

"Why, I . . . Yes . . . How do I know? Of course not! I didn't give it up. I suppose the gateman failed to ask me for it. . . ."

And her brow knit into a slight wrinkle that seemed to mark a strange and intense mental concentration. A second later she seemed to give up, and she confessed:

"Listen, darling . . . I think I had better tell you. . . . It's all so absurd. . . . I'm really quite ashamed. But I think you ought to know. Well . . . see here . . . I simply don't know why I went to Beaulieu Tuesday. There was nothing, absolutely nothing, to call me there . . . at least, nothing that I can remember right now. . . . Nor can I remember having done anything in particular when I got there. . . . I left Tuesday morning and I came back Wednesday night. . . . And I was all tired out when I reached home. . . . There you have the whole story. . . ."

I was so astounded at this incredible tale that I pulled my horse up short.

"The whole story! That's absurd, my dear!

You must have left word at home . . . given some pretext. . . .”

“Of course . . . but what it was I can’t remember!”

“But your housekeeper . . . your maid . . . your husband . . . when you came home, they must have asked you about the villa or something!”

“Yes, my husband asked me if I had had a good trip and I answered that I had!”

“And the train . . . the journey itself . . . the station . . . Beaulieu! Where did you go, when you got out of the train?”

“To . . . to the villa, . . . of course!”

“Of course nothing! You don’t seem to be so sure!”

“Oh, I’m sure . . . sure enough! The trouble is, André . . . I don’t know, it all seems so vague and hazy in my mind . . . and it’s funny . . . the harder I try to remember, the less I seem able to . . . Oh, I’m ill, ill, André! Here . . . here!”

And one of her pink fingers pointed to the vertical wrinkle between her eyebrows. As I sat there looking at her fixedly, searchingly, she burst suddenly into convulsive sobs. I reined my horse to her side, put my arm about her shoulders, and kissed her tears away.

X

FOR I loved the girl!

I make that confession here again, absurd, ridiculous, grimly ironical though the declaration may seem.

I loved her. This I must say so that all of you . . . men and women . . . will understand, and believe!

I loved her. Notice: I met her on a sunny afternoon in May; and again on a moonlight night in June; and I found her beautiful; and I told her so. . . . To you cynics it may seem strange, incredible, to call that love! I can see you smiling!

But—all of you—look around among your memories, try to remember! You have all met your mistresses for the first time at some time or other. Before that, you were not in love. You began with simple curiosity; and your first kiss was a kiss of playfulness—"Once will do no harm!" And perhaps often it was the first and the last kiss.

But more often the first kiss gave you a longing for the second. The flirtation became pas-

sion, and the passion devotion. "Once!" "Again!" "And again!" And, finally, "Forever!" "For all our lives!"

Oh, yes, I know, I know! It was all a dream, and people cannot dream forever. The flesh is weak, and the spirit less enduring than the flesh. You wearied of each other! Forever became a year, six months, six weeks! Love, indifference, infidelity, estrangement, oblivion! Oh yes, I know, I know! But what of that? It was honestly that you loved each other! In good faith you swore: "I must have you with me forever!" In good faith you promised to love each other and cherish each other and cleave unto each other! And truly would you have laid down your lives that your mistresses might never die. . . .

Smile then, if you wish, when I say that I loved her!

XI

SO then, it was twilight, just after sunset on a raw, foggy, rainy day, the 21st of December, 1908—my last day of life. And around me was the hill of the strangely significant name: *Le col de la Mort de Gauthier!* A cry of terror had escaped me:

“Madeleine!”

It was she—Madeleine, the girl I loved, alone, afoot, on that deserted heath, on that raw, foggy, rainy, wintry evening—Madeleine, hurrying along that solitary trail through the sweet-fern and the cat-briar, in her afternoon costume, as she would dress for a tea at a fashionable hotel . . . and twenty miles from home!

“Madeleine!” I called. And she seemed not to hear me, and not to see me; but hurried on, on, on, rapidly, with unerring step, over that rough and broken and rain-soaked ground.

My heart stopped beating. For ten, fifteen, twenty seconds I stood there paralyzed, rooted to the trail. Then I came to myself; and in a mad dash down the incline, I went off in pursuit of her.

Ahead of me I could see her figure already ascending the slope of the third knoll. She moved easily, rapidly, experiencing no difficulty from the matted underbrush and cat-briar. She was following the trail. But at the top of the hill she turned—to the eastward, with her back to Toulon, that is. There a thick curtain of night seemed to have fallen before the taller underbrush. I saw her skirt as it vanished across the line of darkness into shrubbery that reached above her head. A second later I caught a glimpse of her ermine collar farther in, and then once more and then for a third time.

I was running with all the headlong speed I could muster. My foot caught in a snarl of cat-briar. I plunged forward, scraping across a flat stone. But I barely touched the ground. I was on my feet in an instant. “Madeleine! Madeleine!” I called.

I thought I caught sight of her ermine collar again as she hurried across a clearing. Then she was gone. The wet moss was thin above the solid ledging of the knoll. It slipped under my feet, on the brink of a ditch such as that which had cost Siegfried his life. I fell a second time. Again I was on my feet. And now, against the sky over the hill-top ahead of me, profiled on the leaden but much darker

clouds, I saw the same mysterious figure I had seen at first—save that now it was of hazier, more indistinct outline.

“Madeleine! Madeleine!” I shouted desperately. And I dashed on.

Step by step the figure sank behind the crest of the hill. When I reached the place, I found one of her footprints in the mud on the edge of a stone. But she had disappeared completely. The soft moss preserved no record of her passage. Before me lay the silent, deserted slope of the Col de la Mort de Gauthier; to the right the escarpments of the Maurras range; to my left the approaches to the Grand Cap. And no signs of any human being!

In anguished desperation I tore out into the underbrush, on which night had definitely fallen. I was determined to overtake the fugitive, get to the bottom of this prodigious mystery. I ran and ran, all my heart bent on finding the slightest trace of her . . . all my heart and all my bewildered mind. I mounted great boulders with one bound, and was over them in another. I went forward springing from rock to rock, falling at times, turning my ankles, forcing thickets of briars by sheer weight of impact, tearing my clothes, scratching my face and hands, but running, running, running. I thought I saw a light off to the left. I turned in that direction, and

again ran on. I must have spent hours in this fruitless, aimless, despairing search. I remember that finally I sank to the ground, breathless, exhausted, utterly unable to move. I don't know where I fell. I know simply that I lay there, insensible, corpse-like, dead; and, as happens when one had gone beyond his physical and spiritual resources, a deep, dreamless, annihilating sleep came over me.

XII

HOW long I had been sleeping there I do not know. But suddenly a curious, though well-known sensation drew me from my slumber—the sense of a strange presence near me, and of a gaze fixed upon me. I was lying on one side, with my forehead resting on my bent arm. Evidently then I could not see; but the emanation of that presence and the weight of that gaze impressed me at one and the same time, as a veritable blow striking me on the back of the head. The experience was not new to me. Often in a sound sleep have I thus divined the approach of a living being—though never with such intensity as this. I had the consciousness that the person who was thus powerfully exerting his influence upon me could be like no other human being I had ever seen. And I, who at that time—how unutterably distant in the past it seems!—was a young, a vigorous, a courageous man, instead of sitting up at once, and facing my visitant, lay there as I was, for some moments, with my forehead resting on my arm, pretending not to be awake, and listening, listening.

Through my half-opened eyelids, I could see perhaps a square foot of earth and moss in the area encircled by my arm. That earth and that moss were lighted by a pale, trembling, yellowish glow. I understood that someone was waving a light above my head.

At last I did sit up and with a start, as though I had just awakened. And I rose to my feet, drawing back a step in bewilderment.

A man was standing before me, a very very aged man; as I remarked from the long, broad, glistening, snow-white beard that covered his chest and abdomen. That much I could see in spite of the glare from a dark lantern which he was holding with the spotlight up-turned into my face. However, his voice had no huskiness when he addressed me. It was deep and solemn, but without a sign of trembling or of faintness—on the contrary, it seemed resonant with virility and vigor. I was somewhat taken aback, besides, with the curt abruptness with which he questioned me:

“What are you doing here, Monsieur?”

That was not the greeting I had been expecting; and in view of the obvious plight I was in, I found it quite discourteous. But the man was at least three times my age, I judged, and I answered as politely as I could:

“As you see, Sir, I am off the road and quite lost, I fear.”

He kept the spotlight playing on my features, and I observed that his two piercing, extraordinarily luminous eyes were studying me critically.

“Lost, eh? And here! How did you get here, Sir? And where were you going?”

I was now frankly irritated at these irrelevancies; so much so, indeed, that I failed to note the incongruity of such formal and correct language in the mouth of what must apparently have been a charcoal-burner of the mountains.

Drily I exclaimed:

“I came from Toulon by way of Solliès-Pont headed for the battery on the Grand Cap. I missed the trail somewhere near the Col de la Mort de Gauthier. There my horse fell and broke his leg; and I got lost trying to reach the paths up the Cap, cross-country.”

This version of my experiences seemed moderately to satisfy the old man. He took the light away from my eyes and swept the bushes and rocks about us with it. It was, in truth, an appallingly wild locality. In my mad race through the darkness I had reached a jumbled region of rocks and ravines where my presence might well astonish anybody. But I had just as

good a right to wonder. How should he happen to be there, too?

“And you, Sir, what were you doing away off here?”

He shrugged his shoulders and pointed to the top of an escarpment that towered on my left.

“I saw you from up there!” he said.

And he fell silent, as did I.

No longer pestered with the glare in my eyes, I could examine my strange companion at more advantage. He was an old man, no doubt of that, an extremely old man, as his snow-white beard, his wrinkled, withered skin, his lean, tenuous hands attested. But he was a marvelously robust and wiry old fellow. There was no droop to his shoulders. He held his head erect. His arms were well knit at the joints and he seemed lithe and agile on his legs. In view of his whole bearing, which suggested strength, energy, initiative, I gathered that the cane on which he was leaning he carried not for support but as a weapon.

I, a soldier in my early thirties, felt helpless in the presence of that powerful octogenarian. Instinctively my hand went to the automatic in my hip-pocket, where only one of the eight bullets was dead—the one that had put poor Siegfried out of his agony. However, I felt ashamed, almost at once, of such stupid and un-

reasonable fear of the man. I again addressed him, and this time with a deferential and somewhat effusive politeness:

“I have not thanked you, Sir, as yet. Do, please, excuse such rudeness. I appreciate your generous kindness in going to so much trouble in my behalf. I am sure you have saved my life by coming to my rescue down that perilous cliff. Please accept my deepest thanks. I am Captain André Narcy, of the staff of Vice-Admiral de Fierce . . . !”

I stopped, expecting that a name would be volunteered in exchange for mine. But the old man did not introduce himself, though he did listen to what I was saying with the closest attention. I began again:

“I was, I am, the bearer of a dispatch to the corporal on guard at the Grand Cap battery. It was in an effort to execute that mission, unfortunately still unperformed, that I lost my way, wandered aimlessly about for a time, and finally lay down here to sleep when I was quite all in. And now, Sir, might I impose upon your kindness further? Could you not direct me to the Grand Cap trail, the good one, the one I was looking for and could not manage to find myself?”

Meanwhile I was studying the old man carefully. There was nothing unusual about his

dress. His clothes were, to a button approximately, those one might expect to find in such weather on a shepherd, a hunter, a wood-chopper of those mountain regions; heavy hob-nailed shoes and thick leggings, corduroy trousers and coat, a plain flannel shirt. But it was just at this point that the contrast between his costume and the cultivated intonation of his language first impressed me. The observation caused me another thrill of fear. In my confusion I caught his reply but indistinctly:

“The good road, Monsieur? In truth, you are on the bad road, the worst road, I might even say!”

I suppressed my uneasiness as best I could:

“Where am I, exactly? Am I far from the battery?”

“Very, very far!”

“Well, but . . . what do you call this place?”

“I doubt if it has a name! At any rate, you will not find it on your chart!”

“Oh, you must be joking. I can’t be so very far off the road! I must be somewhere between the Mort de Gauthier and the Grand Cap! Call it eight miles to the fort . . . and you will be putting it high!”

The fist that was clenched about the cane rose and fell in a gesture of ironic helplessness:

“Well, call it eight miles, Monsieur. How could you do eight miles in a dark like this?”

Again he swept the spotlight around that chaotic devil’s dump of boulders. To tell the truth, I cringed with involuntary terror, though I did manage to pull myself together again:

“Do them I must, in any event. The dispatch of which I have the honor to be bearer is of the first importance. You will be so kind, Sir, as to suggest the direction of the battery—and I will be infinitely obliged.”

The point of the cane swung upward from the ground toward the steepest of the precipices, the upper brink of which projected out into the chasm in a menacing overhang.

“It’s off in that direction,” said the old man.

I bowed with some ceremony, determined to waste no further time:

“Thank you, and good night, Sir!”

Resolutely I advanced to the foot of the cliff, and climbed up to the first indentation in the virtually perpendicular wall. But a sullen rage came over me as I realized the impossibility of making the ascent:

“Off in this direction, eh? But there are night hawks that seem to get around all right—and with little loss of time!”

I grumbled the words between my clenched teeth, addressing them to my own angry self

alone. The man was fully fifty feet away and could not possibly have heard. Yet I suddenly felt the same pressure on the back of my head and between my shoulders which had been the cause of my awakening. The man was looking at me! That impact was the shock from his piercing eyes! I turned sharply about, almost expecting an attack from him.

But he was standing just where I had left him, his eyes fixed upon me with an expression in no sense hostile. Rather I seemed to catch a smile of kindness playing about his withered, wrinkly features. When he now spoke, the same note of kindly benevolence was sensible in his voice, and the abruptness noticeable in his first questions had also softened measurably:

“Monsieur,” said he, “I was loathe to venture a suggestion which you had failed to invite and which, doubtless, you would be quite unwilling to accept. Nevertheless . . . I should be grievously at fault, were I to let you run to certain death. I will give you an hour to break a leg, or an arm, or your neck, in tumbling into one of these gorges. Suppose you lay with a fractured skull at the foot of a wall of rock—your message would not be delivered any the sooner, would it? Don’t be impatient! Wait till daylight comes! And an early morning start will bring you to the fort and, perhaps, in

time. Try to get there now and your dispatch, I assure you, will never reach its destination!"

He stood there thinking for a moment and then he concluded pensively: "A mountaineer as experienced as I am might possibly venture such a thing. But at night, over rock that is forever breaking off under your feet . . . !"

I don't know why, at just that moment, my thoughts reverted to the other encounter I had had a few hours earlier in that self-same neighborhood. I closed my eyes to reconstruct in my mind the image of Madeleine, deaf, mute, unconscious apparently, running that heath like a somnambulist. . . . And for the third time, but on this occasion full in the face, I felt the impact of the fluid energy which seemed to spurt from the eyes that were fixed upon me. When I looked up again, the same uncontrollable terror was in possession of me: the man was in truth gazing at me—and that was all. An extravagant suspicion flitted across my mind: that man, that curious old man—could he be listening to the sound of my thoughts, as I could hear the sound of his words?

At last he seemed willing to come to the point:

"Consider, Monsieur! I live not far from here! Would you not accept my hospitality until dawn? The rain is beginning again. It

will be wet and cold on the mountains, and it is hardly midnight.”

I looked around in astonishment into the wall of darkness about us. He lived near-by? A house, in that appalling solitude?

He understood my perplexity.

“Quite so!” he said, answering my unexpressed thought. “Quite so! Just a step or two! This way, Monsieur, if you please!”

His voice had now a soft, caressing gentleness; though I sensed an imperious order in his words—a command I could only obey.

When he turned to go, I followed him.

XIII

EASILY, lightly, rapidly, over the jumbled rocks and through the tangled underbrush, the hoary old man made his way, beating his cane to right and left to open a path before us. I kept carefully to his foot-prints, really exerting myself, however, to maintain his rate of progress.

Fully a quarter of an hour it must have been that we walked thus in file one behind the other. Then my guide stopped of a sudden, turned toward me, and said:

“Monsieur, you will be careful!”

His cane pointed to some obstacle, or to some danger, just to my right. Cautiously I stepped nearer, and a creeping chill ran over me: we were on the brink of a precipice, its edges so thoroughly masked with fern that a step six inches off the path would have hurled me into a void. I could not have guessed the nearness of such peril. Feeling the ground in front of me with my toe, I leaned over and peered down into the abyss. Along its bottom a mountain torrent ran, black water rushing over polished white stones. The sheer face of

the gorge offered not a projection to foot or hand.

“Keep well to the left, Monsieur,” said the old man; and he strode on.

The ground now took on a strange contour previously unknown to me. The ditched, pock-marked, crevassed soil of the Mort de Gauthier where my horse was lying, and the maze of gorges through which I had pursued Madeleine, came to an end. We were now on a gently sloping table-land broken in all directions by curious blocks of stone. The soil was overgrown with brambles, juniper, and numerous other spiny shrubs. The rocks sprang naked from the earth in abrupt faces cut apparently to geometrical design, triangles, squares, polygons, as though fashioned with human tools. On the one hand, none of their surfaces was sufficiently smooth to warrant the assumption of deliberate working; on the other there was too little irregularity in their structure and disposition to allay wonder at such a strange caprice of Nature. As a whole, indeed, they formed a veritable labyrinth, through which it would have been difficult to pick one's way even in broad daylight. The old man went indifferently onward, nevertheless, not hesitating in the least, and finding his path without effort through this entanglement of scattered boulders.

Again the topography changed. The monoliths became fewer in number; the plateau had a perceptible down grade. The junipers, myrtles and mastics grew stunted and less crowded, and the land was otherwise quite barren.

If I describe this walk of ours in such detail, I do so in the hope that some of you may be tempted to seek out in the neighborhood of my misfortune, the house of which I am to speak. Its exact location I cannot recall. I could not find it again for the life of me; nor could I really identify it among other houses you might show me. It is, nevertheless, the House of the Secret, though all I can say of it is that, at last, we came to it.

In the opaque wall of darkness ahead of us a tall black mass stood out against the paler black of the night around it. First came a hedge of tall cypress trees, the boundary of a private park, a hedge like the thousands of other hedges one may find about the country villas of Provence — the Provence that frizzles in summer sunshine.

In the hedge was an iron gate, between the bars of which the old man slipped a hand and turned some secret lock. The gate swung open. My feet began to tread on a soft, thick sod, unmown. Brushing my head I could feel low-

hanging branches of cedars, pines and cork-trees. Finally through the inky black of the grove the brick-stone front of a house came into view. It was so dark under the matted interlacing of branches along the walk, that I could not isolate a single distinctive feature on the façade before me, except perhaps the stone stairway up which I went to a door. There were just eight steps. I remember because I counted them. One other detail: from the roof, and on my left as I went in, an indistinct but tall, slender mass seemed to rise, a sort of tower, or belfry. . . . Mark this item carefully. . . . It may help you!

The door was of heavy oak, studded with iron nails. The knocker was a hammer and an anvil, the latter with two points and set deep into the thick panelling.

As he raised the hammer, my companion turned to me, his eyes gleaming with an eagerness I did not like. But his voice, soft, calm, caressing, benevolent, once more relieved my fear, once more constrained me to resist an impulse to stand on my guard like an animal at bay!

“Monsieur,” he said, “I am sure you will forgive me for a slight advertence: my father, who is about to open the door, is a very old man, and his sleep must be respected; you will be

good enough to make as little noise inside as possible!"

The metallic beat of the hammer upon the anvil strangely mingled in my ears with the words I had just heard. It was something like an echo of the stupor, which, at these strange phrases, struck me like a blow. So this old fellow had a father, whom he referred to as an old man! If he was eighty, more or less, how old would this parent be?

Again the hammer fell upon the anvil in a double rapid stroke like the ritualistic stamp of the fencer's foot as the duel begins. And this double stroke was followed by another, a single one, like the first.

The door swung open.

XIV.

THE anteroom that now came into view was a spacious one, dimly lighted by two candles. I could make out a series of frescos on the four walls above the paneling, which was of some dark almost black wood, oak or walnut, I should say. Except for the heads of two stags with antlers, there were no ornamental furnishings. The doors, in some ancient style, were so fashioned as to blend, when closed, with the sheathing.

But one detail I did see with absolute distinctness the moment I crossed the threshold. Standing in front of me, with his left hand still on the latch which it had just opened, was an old man so like in every particular to my guide that I turned, despite myself, to be sure it was really a case of two different individuals and not of one with an image reflected in a mirror. They had the same long, wide, flowing snow-white beards; the same serious, motionless, mysterious eyes. Yes, I turned and stared. Such complete identity was beyond belief. But yet, they were really two men,—father and son,

—the son bowing with deference to the father. In fact, this demeanor on the part of the person who had come through the heath with me was the means, henceforth, by which I managed to distinguish the younger from the older man; though both, to the eye, seemed equally full of years, not to say centuries, ages; both equally robust, withal, equally erect of carriage, equally muscular with the litheness of youth.

I had stopped instinctively, eventually mustering presence of mind enough to bow deeply to mine host, a greeting which he returned politely but without pronouncing a word. His eyes, meanwhile, were surveying me with the most searching fixity. After a time they turned for the fraction of a second upon my escort, and I understood that they carried a question, imperiously.

“I took upon myself, Sir, the responsibility of bringing this gentleman here. I found him lying out in the rain in the hapless state you see him in. He had gone astray among the boulders at the outer end of the labyrinth.”

These sentences were uttered in a half-whisper, as though the speaker were afraid of disturbing a household at slumber.

The father did not answer for a space of time which I found a markedly long one. Then he said:

“Your conduct was quite proper, I believe, Sir.”

And he too spoke in a half-whisper.

These “Sirs” between father and son astonished me with their savor of antique formality; and I was impelled thereby to glance at the costume of this hoary gentleman who was thus addressing his offspring with the ceremonious formulas of bygone feudal days. Nothing in particular! A rustic outfit in corduroy, exactly like that of the “boy”; except that the elder man wore old-fashioned knee-breeches with woolen stockings and buckles at the knees.

The son was meantime recounting my story to his parent with a fullness that neglected no detail.

“Monsieur is an officer,” said he. “His name is Narcy, Captain André Narcy. He is the bearer of a sealed dispatch for the fort on the Grand Cap, and this dispatch, a very urgent one so it seems, must be delivered at the earliest possible moment. That is why I judged it best to offer our hospitality to monsieur for the night: he must have a good rest to be in condition for a hurried journey tomorrow morning, when daylight will permit him to make the ascent without such a distant wandering from his path as he fell into—for lack of a guiding hand—tonight. For, without any doubt what-

ever, monsieur met not a living soul along the trail to set him on the right road. And that, without any doubt whatever, is the reason why monsieur strayed so very very far from this Grand Cap where he was going."

The innuendos in this narrative did not fail to impress me. I scanned the faces of the two men, one after the other, anxiously; but neither carried the slightest expression. The father answered also in a tone that was entirely normal, repeating word for word his earlier sentence of approval:

"Your conduct was quite proper, I believe, Sir."

I groped about in my mind for an appropriate phrase of thanks; but before I hit upon one, mine host, pointing a finger at one of the invisible doors in the paneling, remarked, still addressing his son:

"It is evident that monsieur should be allowed to retire at once. Be so good as to show him to his room, Sir! You will need a light."

I bowed in acknowledgement, without speaking. The son was already in motion, leading the way with the same spotlight playing on the room about us. Our first steps on the tiled floor raised a curious echo in that all but unfurnished chamber, the four walls of which threw each sound back upon us and seemed to

prolong it with a briefly sustained tremor. The spotlight chanced to cast a round, luminous circle upon one of the frescos. As far as my hasty glimpse of it enabled me to judge, it was a mythological subject in faded color and not over-stressed design—a birth of Aphrodite from the sea, perhaps.

My guide drew back, in succession, three long thick bolts, longer and thicker than any bolts I could remember ever having seen. They secured the door to which the elder of the two men had pointed. A closer view of the wall revealed to me that beside this door there was another, similarly disguised in the paneling and fastened in the same way. Taken together, they might have been mistaken for the two wings of one folding door, joining very badly, for that matter, despite their rugged hinges; for a gap of a full inch was visible under each of the presumed wings, leaving free play to draughts.

These observations had scarcely flashed through my mind, when the old man, the father, that is, who had been standing in the center of the reception hall with his eyes glued upon me, advanced suddenly in my direction, and his steps, light as they were, echoed about the room as ours had done. I stopped and looked at him.

With a gesture, and speaking to me directly for the first time, he said:

“Monsieur, I forgot to remind you that in our house, and not far indeed from the quarters you will occupy, we have a case of sickness. Might I request you, therefore, kindly to make as little noise as possible?”

This was the second time I had been urged not to talk; but the pretext had been different on each occasion. . . .

And then something happened . . . a very inconsiderable thing, which gave me a distinct shiver of excitement. It was not so much myself who trembled, but rather that submerged, unconscious being we each have within us which watches while we slumber and ever has a memory and a consciousness quite apart from our waking selves. . . .

From under the other door—the door which had not been opened, namely—a sudden draught of warm air came. It was cold, noticeably cold, in the reception hall; but behind the closed door was a room which they kept much better heated. Now that draught of warm air! . . . As it passed through my nostrils, I became gradually aware of its fragrance. It was sweet with a perfume which my conscious self did not recognize, but which my submerged ego at once remembered—my submerged ego only, indeed.

That is why I had crossed the threshold of the open door before I really understood. . . .

Before I really understood, that is, what the closed door concealed. . . .

XV

BEYOND the door that was open stretched a passageway, and at the end of the passageway came another door. Once we were through the latter, the spotlight of my escort fell upon a flight of stairs, six steps high, as I counted. I noted also that the treads were of the same red square tiles as the floor of the reception hall. Only the nosings were of wood, a wood much worn from long service. At the top of the steps my guide opened one last door.

I now found myself in a very dark room, so dark, indeed, that I paused just inside the threshold from fear of colliding with some piece of furniture. The man, however, drew aside the top of his lantern and from the flame within it began to light the three wicks of a massive iron candlestick, a sort of tripod fashioned to represent three lances supporting one another.

The room brightened. I noted that it contained this candelabrum, one chair, and one bed, the latter simple, home-made articles such as a peasant might improvise for himself.

“And I wish you a good night, Monsieur,” said my guide, with a bow. “Please sleep quite

at your ease. I shall have the honor of waking you in time, myself."

"At sunrise?" said I.

"At sunrise," he answered, "or perhaps . . . perhaps a moment or two before sunrise. . . ."

That seemed to me a very natural thing to say, and I returned his courtesy:

"Good night, Monsieur!"

He went away. I listened to his footsteps as they clacked on the tiles of the six steps, and then on the pavement of the passage. Finally I heard the door into the anteroom swing to, and, less to my surprise than to my alarm, the great iron bolts slide back into their places: the grating sound they made, however slight, was quite audible in the absolute silence of the mansion.

I sat down on the wicker chair at the foot of the plain pine bedstead.

In sitting down I had intended to collect my thoughts if possible, bring a little order into the chaos of impressions, suspicions and fears that were whirling in my bewildered brain. But I had hardly touched the seat, when an unexpected sensation put an end to my reflections.

I had cast my eyes about the four walls of the room where I now was — four walls cheaply papered in a stock design of loud colors. Again

the miserable poverty of the furnishings had impressed me, with the exception of the antique candlestick. The place, indeed, in its present condition, had all the appearances of a spare room, roughly fitted up with these few odd and ill-matched articles. I should not have thought it strange had I detected there the close musty odor that one always meets in apartments long unoccupied and rarely aired.

But that was not the smell that came to my nostrils. Quite the contrary in fact! The room was suddenly fragrant with a warm living perfume, a perfume that now reminded me of the one I had vaguely perceived in the draught from under the closed door of the anteroom. It was not the same perfume, by any means, though it was of the same general kind, one of those essences which float about every house where women are, combining the most diverse aromas into a single fragrance that is the alluring fragrance of feminine beauty.

I brought all my senses to bear upon it. "Heliotrope," I analyzed, . . . "and rose"! The isolation of these two essences seemed all at once to sharpen my memory of the earlier perfume; the latter, unmistakably, had been a lily of the valley.

"*Muguet*," I said aloud, "lily of the valley!"

All a-quiver I leapt to my feet, terrified,

stunned, but ferociously determined. Of course! Of course! The two syllables of that French word, *muguet*, had brought a flood of light into my clouded mind. Of course! *Muguet!* Her perfume! Madeleine! Madeleine!

It is curious that in the overwhelming anguish that had now seized upon me, an insignificant thought came to the surface of my seething consciousness and restored all the coolness and self-control that I had lost: "What an unconscionable ass I have been! Fool! Fool! Fool! Of course! Of course! Why did I not get the point at the very first? Long ago, long ago? After the very first suspicious words I heard from the mouths of those two weird hosts of mine? . . . Fool of fools! Why did I not recognize her perfume out there in the hall where I first perceived it—before those three bolts were drawn upon me, leaving me a helpless prisoner in this hole where I am caught like a rat in a trap?

"Helpless, eh? Like a rat in a trap, eh? Not quite."

I was almost normally calm as I put a hand to my belt and drew my revolver. Helpless, eh? There were eight cartridges in my automatic, and I had used only one—the one that put poor Siegfried out of his misery! "Seven left!

Helpless? Not so helpless as all that? There must be seven of them!"

I snapped the lock on the hammer and opened the magazine. The seven bullets were in place. I threw the barrel back into position and released the lock again, testing the trigger lightly with my finger to be sure the requisite free play was there. I put the pistol into my coat pocket, with my right hand upon it.

"At sunrise, eh? You were coming back at sunrise, old Methuselah? Do! I shall be glad to see you!"

I looked at my watch. Two o'clock! It was mid-winter time. The dawn would be long in coming.

I rose from the chair and stepped over to the bed. The sheets were singularly delicate, the coverlets thick and downy. Another breath of perfume floated past my nostrils.—I buried a fist in my hot, feverish cheek. . . . That bed, so daintily prepared! It had been offered to me! But for whom had it been made so cosy? Who slept there ordinarily? And my thoughts flashed out through the walls and partitions of that accursed mansion to another room, where there would be another bed and in it a woman, sleeping! Madeleine, my Madeleine!

The dart of horrified jealousy that ran through my heart was like the thrust of a sharp,

white-hot sword. Madeleine! There, in that other chamber, at night! The victim of what unconscionable sorcery! The plaything of what loathsome and unmentionable desires!

But no—my calmer judgment soon concluded. Those men—demons, perhaps—could not have been dastards in the thrall of lust! That secret house could not be a House of Love! What was the mystery, then? What? Oh, what?

The three candles were flickering at the three points of their tripod of lances. The door! I looked at it. Here also the joinings yawned from age. And that would doubtless be the case with the window.

For there was a window in the room, the room that was really my prison.

I stepped over to examine it, pressing my forehead to the panes and plunging my gaze into the outer blanket of darkness.

Nothing! Nothing at all. An impenetrable pall of inky blackness came right up against my eyes. A thick growth of ivy formed an outer curtain over the window, weaving a fabric through and around the heavy iron bars which guarded it.

A prison! That was the very name for it!

I heard footsteps moving softly along one of the partitions behind me. I held my breath.

Soon silence returned, complete death-like silence.

I went back to the bed and lay down upon it, waiting, ready for anything. I had my clothes and my boots on. My hand clutched the butt of the automatic in my pocket.

I waited, my eyes glued upon the door, my ears straining to catch the slightest sound.

I waited!

XVI

LITTLE by little my brain had regained its lucidity and my heart its normal beat. Now, outstretched on the bed, with my boots and clothes on, and my hand upon my pistol, I was waiting, waiting. I noted the fact: the hand upon my pistol had not a tremor: it was ready to kill. My Adventure was approaching its dénouement. I would soon have to fight a battle, where I must needs come off victorious. These considerations were like a potent cordial to my overstrained nerves. So cool and collected indeed had I become that I was now prepared to take everything as a matter of course. I could, that is, restrain my astonishment, or at least postpone any expression of it. Madeleine, in that mysterious house, at that time of night! No, there was no explaining it, with any explanation at all convincing. But, for the moment, no explanation was necessary, or in point. We would come to that later—after the combat—which must end in my victory. Meantime, all conjecture would be superfluous.

The three candles were still burning on their

tripod of the three crossed lances. But they were getting short. I took out my watch and looked at it. Half past two! The candles would almost certainly fail to outlast the night. And to shoot accurately you must see, clearly see, your target! I rose from the bed, walked over to the candlestick and put out two of the three wicks burning. Then I went back to my bed again.

But I had my boots on. My spurs had scraped noisily on the tiling of the floor; and, since the latter had no carpet, my heels had clacked loudly as I walked. And that was not the worst of it. As my weight came down upon the edge of the bed, the spring gave a long, piercing, metallic squeak, which, in case anyone at all were guarding me, had a fine chance of being heard, in that sepulchral silence reigning, two or three partitions away. This reflection had had just time to settle clearly in my mind, when, and almost as an echo to the creaking of the spring, the lock in the door of my room creaked in turn.

With a bound I was off the bed; and I had to restrain myself in order not to level my automatic upon the door and let fly the moment it opened.

I managed to control that impulse. Besides there came a knock, a discreet, a courteous

knock, on the panel. The door swung open slowly, and in the doorway I saw one of my hosts, I could not decide whether the father or the son, but at any rate one of the two old men with the long, broad, glistening, snow-white beards. He was standing there quite motionless, not presuming to come in. His eyes, in truth, had swept me with a glance from head to foot; and there I was, with my clothes and my boots on, in the unmistakable posture of a man who had not been in bed at all, who had resisted slumber, and kept on watch, nervous, suspicious, mistrustful, ready for any emergency that might arise. I caught a rapid flash in those scrutinizing eyes, a lightning-like flare that vanished on the instant. And again a thought that I had had before flitted across my straining consciousness: those penetrating eyes—did they not have, perchance, the power of going deeper than my forehead, piercing through to the secret thoughts harbored naked in my brain?

And then the old man spoke:

“Monsieur has not been sleeping. Truly, we suspected as much. In view of that, why should monsieur pass such a dull time alone here in this chamber? Would monsieur not like to join us in the room below? I think that would be far better—for monsieur, as well as for us.”

I had regained my composure once more; and I answered with decision:

“I will accept your invitation, Sir!”

And I advanced upon him.

But he drew back, as though to let me pass in front of him. This I refused to do. He may have guessed what was in my mind, for he did not insist. He led the way in front of me, with the words:

“As you will, Monsieur, . . . just to show you the way! . . .”

On reaching the reception hall, I stopped in front of the door where I had caught the breath of Madeleine’s perfume. But it was not toward it—not as yet toward it—that I was guided.

In fact, the old man went straight across the anteroom, and, seeing me motionless in front of the same door, politely called:

“This way, if Monsieur will be so kind!”

Another door, concealed as all the others in the paneling, now opened, not, however, into a corridor, but directly into a large, in fact, a very very large room, which was thus cut off from the reception hall by the thickness of one partition.

My eyes winced before the glare of some fifty or sixty candles distributed about the room in holders along the walls and of two massive lamps, one to either side of the fire-place. The

latter was a majestic hearth in ancient style with a huge embossed and sculptured hood spacious enough, I thought, to accommodate a goodly number of whole oxen.

Seated in an armchair and facing me as I came in was the old father—so at least I decided; but next to him, now, was a third aged man whom I had not seen as yet, and whom I took for a much younger person than the other two, though he also was far from young. They both bowed in greeting as I entered.

I stopped near enough to the door to prevent its being closed. The man to whom I had not been introduced motioned toward an empty chair. I declined it with a shake of my head; whereupon he rose:

“As you will,” said he, “I understand your feeling!”

His voice was in a very queer falsetto.

I saw him push his chair back and come forward a step in my direction. His two aged companions took up positions to the right and left of him, as though he were their chief. Chief indeed he proved to be.

There was a moment's silence: then this man resumed:

“Monsieur le capitaine, I must offer you my apologies. It may seem inconsiderate of me to have disturbed you in your slumbers. But it

may be you were not having a very quiet repose. In that case I may count on your forgiveness! . . .”

He broke off, and pointed with a gesture first to the one and then to the other of his two companions.

“And pray forgive them, too,” he added. “They are well-meaning boys, on the whole, though their manners leave something to be desired. In this they are entitled to be excused, perhaps, in view of the place and the times we are living in and our aloofness from most men of the world. Certainly it would be difficult to explain away all their breaches of good form to a stickler on the niceties of conduct or to some one of over-delicate susceptibilities. But such, fortunately, you prove not to be, and I must congratulate you on your forbearance. Nevertheless, I cannot overlook the first and grossest of the impertinences inflicted on you. When you were so kind as to volunteer your name, this young man here neglected to give his name to you. I have reproved him severely for this oversight, and I solicit your indulgence in his behalf. He is the Vicomte Antoine, at your service, Sir; and here is Count François, his father, if you please. And I—you will pardon me—am the Marquis Gaspard, father of Count François and grandfather to Vicomte Antoine. There

you have us all; and now, I trust, you will not impose upon me the hardship of remaining longer standing. Let us be comfortable! Will you not please take a chair!"

The door behind me was wide open still, as I satisfied myself with a glance in that direction. Moreover, the strange address I had been listening to had a curiously persuasive quality. I sat down as had been suggested, and the three of them did likewise.

"Dear me, dear me," said the Marquis Gaspard as he eased himself in his cushions. "You have left the door wide open, and a terrible draught is coming into the room!"

Hastily the Vicomte Antoine arose; but he was not so quick as I. I was at the door in a second and closed it with my own hands, making sure, meanwhile, that a simple latch was all that fastened it.

"Thanks, a thousand thanks!" exclaimed the marquis. "But, Monsieur le capitaine, why go to such extremes of courtesy? My grandson could have closed it just as well!"

I was already in my seat again, and the vicomte in his. There was a period of silence, in which my eyes had time to flit about the room. A couple of logs were glowing in the ancient fire-place. The candles about the walls were gleaming brightly. The beams in the ceiling

were darkened from the smoke of the open fire during many years. The easy chairs I found quite beautiful in their upholstery of old brocade.

And there were my three hosts!

An uncontrollable astonishment now came over me, something far in excess of any of the surprises I had experienced heretofore. Those two more than centenarians in their long snow-white beards were respectively son and grandson of the third, who seemed to be, by far, the youngest of the three! His face, smooth shaven, had not the trace of a wrinkle. There was no suggestion of sunkenness about his eyes; just as his falsetto voice came from high in his throat without a tremor and without hesitation. And yet—such the situation seemed to be! He was indeed the ancestor par excellence, the veritable patriarch, and of an age that beggared the full many years of the fathers of Abraham!

But of what could I be really sure?

The silence continued unbroken. Now we were in our chairs, the three of them facing me. They looked for all the world like a tribunal, with the marquis figuring as chief justice, and his son and grandson as associates. And I, what was I in that picture? Suspect? Defendant? A culprit awaiting sentence?

The silence lasted an unutterably long time.

The three pairs of eyes fixed upon me eventually got on my nerves. To conceal my annoyance and self consciousness, I turned my head and again examined the vast hall. It was a sort of living-room—low-studded—and not a parlor, nor a lounge. The woodwork on the chairs was gilded, and the upholstery, as I had before observed, was of old brocade. The plastering was painted simply, without hangings, mirrors, or pictures, of any kind. Meagre, also, the furnishings: in addition to our four arm-chairs, two divans in the same style (an impeccable Louis XV), and two seats of fantastic form—*dormeuses*, one might have called them—with complicated rests for arms and feet and head, and so deep that they might have smothered rather than accommodated the human form. I further noticed an old-fashioned clock and a chest, on opposite sides of the room, and then a kind of horse, or easel, such as painters use to incline their canvases according to the fall of light.

I was studying this latter object, when the Marquis Gaspard coughed, and then sneezed noisily. My eyes came back to him. He was holding a snuff box in his hand and had just taken a pinch from it. He returned the object to his pocket, and then began, evidently by way of introduction:

“Monsieur le capitaine, I am eager, before all else, to convince you of our good will in your regard, a good will that is absolute and which will prove, I trust, efficient. Changing times have done us wrong, to tell the truth; for to look at us, I suppose, one would take us rather for brigands of the wild than for amiable, well-intentioned gentlemen. And yet, we are not so bad as we seem, a fact of which you will, in the end, become aware.”

The old man fell silent, took out his snuff-box again, treated himself to another pinch, and then sat thinking for a moment.

“Monsieur,” he resumed at last, “I should dislike being put into the position of matching wits with you. I prefer to rely on your honesty and honor as a soldier of France. I put the question quite bluntly therefore: Was it, or was it not, by pure chance, that you came, last evening, so very very close to this residence of ours?”

I did not have time to answer. He silenced me with a gesture and went on:

“Of course, I take a number of things for granted. You did not venture into this retreat for the purpose merely of paying us a visit! Far from that, monsieur! My vanity would not be crossed if I did not hear such an extravagant avowal on your part. I am quite ready to admit

that before this evening our triple existence played a slight if any part at all in your normal thoughts and preoccupations. I am right on that point, am I not? Quite so! So much for that!

“Nevertheless, it is not inconceivable that your present trespass on our domains may be due to something more, a little something more, than plain simple chance. . . . May I expatiate: monsieur le vicomte, my grandson, found you some hours ago in an extraordinary place, to say the least. You were on your way from the Mort de Gauthier to the Grand Cap? Be it so! Heaven preserve me from doubting your assertion in the slightest. And yet, and yet! The fact is that to reach the point where the vicomte found you, you must have proceeded with your back persistently and repeatedly turned upon your goal. The brush and undergrowth on the mountains, I suppose, are by no means an easy problem for the wayfarer. To find one’s way about therein requires no little presence of mind. Permit me, nevertheless, to express my great surprise that a gentleman of such talent as I perceive in you, a gentleman trained in cartography as the members of your distinguished profession are, should have gone so far, so very very far, astray, and over such rough and trying ground! My honor, Monsieur!

Must one assume that some will-o'-the-wisp, running the heath to lure poor travellers to destruction, may have caught you in its spell! I suggest that hypothesis—one I am by no means loathe to accept. So I ask you, Monsieur le capitaine: Was it such a wandering fay—an evil fairy of the deadliest lineage—that brought you to our refuge?"

He concluded, and fastened his eyes upon me.

From the first syllable in his quaintly formal discourse, I had foreseen the point at which he was ultimately to arrive. So I was not by any means taken unawares. His address, besides, had been a long one, and I had had plenty of time to make a supreme decision. When he came to his will-o'-the-wisp, my mind was quite made up. Gently my hand had made its way to my pocket and come to rest on my revolver. I had withdrawn my left leg from beneath my chair and stiffened the muscles of the calf. Ready to spring forward and mix in, I now looked up and answered without a tremor:

"Monsieur, will you not take your own choice? You have suggested chance, foxfire, fairies. Have it as you will. I have no reply to make. On the contrary I have a number of questions to put to you!"

He did not bat an eyelash, nor did the men to the left and right of him; but eventually a smile

came to his lips and refused to fade as time went on. I got a good grip on my automatic.

“I have no intention,” I resumed, “of matching wits with you either! I expect immediate frankness on your part; for you will find it to your interest, I assure you, not to prevaricate by a syllable. Shall we then come to the point without evasion? I ask you, monsieur: are you by any chance acquainted with a young lady, Madame Madeleine de X . . . by name?”

I gave her name in full, of course.

The Marquis Gaspard, still smiling and more blandly if anything, nodded and waved his hand in emphasis of assent.

“Very well,” said I. “I will go on. Monsieur, is it, or is it not, a fact, that this lady is a prisoner, at this moment, in this house?”

The hoary head was now slowly raised, while the same wide opened hand sketched a gesture of perplexity. The smile puckered into something expressive of incertitude.

“A prisoner?” said he. “That is hardly the word, Monsieur. It is a fact that the lady in question is, and at this moment as you say, honoring us with her distinguished presence in this house. But if, as I can now hardly doubt, you chanced to meet her on your way, you must have been able to see for yourself, Monsieur, that she was coming alone and of her own ac-

cord, without constraint from anyone, to visit us under this roof where you wrongfully choose to call her a prisoner—as she is not, Monsieur, my word of honor!”

Whereupon, he settled back into his chair, and his ghoulish, ironical, joyous face stood out more clearly against the bright brocade of the cushions.

He had outmanoeuvred me in the exchange, and for a second or two I was disconcerted. Then, however, I regained the offensive.

“As you will have it, Sir,” I said. “I was wrong, in my choice of words: I confess my error. Madame de X. . . . is a free woman here; and, accordingly, there is no reason in the world why I should not be admitted to her presence at once, to offer her my respectful homage. May I see her? I am one of her friends, the most intimate of her friends, I might say.”

The smiling, clean-shaven mouth relaxed into a broad laugh accentuated with little explosions of mirth in that queer falsetto:

“Oh, Monsieur le capitaine, you are telling us nothing we do not know, believe me, Sir. And rather, pray excuse the generous liberty I am taking in laughing at an affair such as yours and hers. I date from very long ago; and in my day, we were not so particular about secrecy in such matters. Let us pass on, pass on. I see

that I have hurt your feelings by my inopportune mirth. No offense, I assure you. Let us forget that whole side of the subject. You ask to interview Madame de X. . . . Nothing, in fact, would be easier; but unfortunately, Madame de X. . . . was feeling very tired, and went to bed, not long ago. She must now be in her first sleep; and I know you are far too much of a gentleman to disturb a lady under such conditions—to mention only the first of many obstacles to your satisfaction.”

He was making fun of me; and my face burned hot with anger.

“I insist,” said I, mastering my indignation. “I promise further not to disturb Madame de X. . . . if her first sleep is as deep and peaceful as you assert. But I insist on seeing her—and I have a right to, I should say, a right which I am certain you will not dispute.”

At last the smile faded from the Marquis Gaspard’s face. His eyes settled upon me searchingly, as he replied in an earnest voice:

“Monsieur le capitaine, you are, rest quite assured, in a position to ask everything in this house, without finding anything denied you. Will you follow me!”

He arose, walked to the door, opened it, and stepped across the reception hall. I followed in his footsteps in nervous astonishment. The

other two men also rose and came along behind me.

“Monsieur,” said the marquis softly, “you are now able to understand, I trust, why you were several times requested to make no noise in your apartment, which is so close to this one. . . .”

I had guessed rightly, from the first. It was the room behind the door with the three long thick bolts, from under which the perfume so familiar to my nostrils had come—the fragrance of *muguet*, of lilies-of-the-valley. And it was just such a room as I had imagined later—a naked, sparsely furnished chamber like the one they had given to me; and the same bed with fine sheets and silken coverlets.

On that bed Madeleine was lying, her eyes closed, her lips white, her cheeks a leaden gray. They had told me the truth, also. She was asleep, deeply, too deeply, sunk in slumber, a strange, bloodless, icy slumber, nearer to death, perhaps, than to life.

“Monsieur will be mindful strictly of his promise,” cautioned the Marquis Gaspard. “You have satisfied yourself that Madame is sleeping, soundly sleeping. I may add that she is so greatly fatigued that the shock of a sudden awakening might be fatal to her. . . .”

The words were uttered in a grave, solemn

voice in striking contrast with the bantering tone he had hitherto adopted.

From the very depths of my being a cold, relentless anger rose, as a hurricane of winter rises on an unsheltered plain. Drawing my pistol, I turned sharply upon the man, my enemy, and, my finger upon the unlocked trigger, I pressed the muzzle against his heart: "Peace!" I commanded, "Not a word from any one of you, or I shoot this fellow like a dog! Now, you speak up, you, Sir, you! And the truth, as you value your life! This woman! What are you doing with her here?"

I had my eyes fixed upon those of the old man under my pistol.

And these began to glow, to glow, to glow! What was happening to me? For a second I was blinded, dazzled, dazed. Then a sudden panic seized on me. I felt my prey slipping from my clutches. With my last ounce of will-power I pressed upon the trigger; but the weapon did not go off. The eyes of my prisoner had fallen slowly, quietly, deliberately from my eyes upon my hand. A vise-like grip fell upon my fingers, paralyzing, bruising, crushing them. The automatic slipped from my grasp and fell to the floor. . . .

Then, in the same deep, solemn voice, coolly, calmly, as though nothing whatever had oc-

curred, the Marquis Gaspard answered my question:

“What am I doing with this woman here? No query could be more natural, more legitimate, I am sure, Monsieur. I shall consider it a privilege to satisfy your curiosity. But perhaps Monsieur would prefer to return whence we came, to avoid any disturbance of Madame, in her slumbers.”

My two arms were hanging loose at my sides. And my two legs were free. Nevertheless I felt bound hand and foot, unable to make the slightest movement save such as my master, the Marquis Gaspard, commanded. . . . A prisoner, body and soul, I obeyed in silence. I walked back toward the room we had left a few moments before. As I stepped through the door of Madeleine's chamber, I experienced a bitter longing to give her one more glance, one more, one more.

But it was not vouchsafed me to turn my head.

XVII

MONSIEUR le capitaine," the Marquis Gaspard began, "you are in a position to ask anything of us here, without its being denied you—anything except one thing—but of this we shall speak later. For the moment you have been good enough to question me in reference to Madame de X. . . . and I should consider myself rude indeed, were I not to answer. The explanation may be longer than you expect, I dare say. That matters little! I am completely at your service; I am ready to satisfy your every desire! Forgive me this preamble, which may seem long extended. And forgive me also if I chance to bore you with a narrative which also may seem irrelevant, but the necessity of which I am sure you will recognize as we proceed."

He thought a moment. Then he drew his snuff-box, opened it, offered a pinch to the man on his right and another to the man on his left, took one himself, and finally continued:

"Monsieur, I was born very far from here, in a little town in Germany. It was in the year of Our Lord. . . ."

The old man stopped. Count François had leapt from his armchair and extended a broad flat hand before his father as though begging that latter to reveal no more. The Marquis Gaspard fell silent, in fact, for as long as three seconds, in the meantime looking steadily at his son, his lips perked into an expression of indulgent irony.

“I declare!” said he, eventually, in his queer falsetto voice, “that from you, Monsieur François, at your age! Will you never grow up, Sir? Imagine! Do you not suppose that Monsieur le capitaine is already well initiated, too well initiated, into the Secret? What matters it whether he stop where he is now, or go on to learn the rest of it?”

He turned toward me again and repeated:

“Monsieur, I was born in a little town in Germany, as I had the honor of informing you. It was at Eckernförde, not far from Schleswig, in the year of Our Lord, One Thousand, Seven Hundred and Thirty Three! 1733! Yes, Monsieur!

“Today is the twenty-second of December, 1908. Figure it up yourself. I am one hundred and seventy-five years old! Don’t be too much surprised, Monsieur. Such is the simple fact, and it will seem simpler still, as I progress with my explanation. If we were more at leisure and

your curiosity should extend that far, it would be a great pleasure for me to give you a detailed story of my life; not, of course, of my whole life—that you would find a rambling, disconnected narrative, I am sure—but the more interesting moments, my first fifty years, let us say. That, however, would take us far afield, and the night, though a winter's one, would scarcely suffice for such a tale. Let us keep to essentials, therefore.

“My father was a gentleman, a soldier in the service of His Majesty King Christian VI of Denmark. He had played a distinguished rôle in the wars of the preceding reign; but his position was not brilliant at the court of this Prince, who was so wholly engrossed with the gentler arts of letters, science and society. All Europe, for that matter, was enjoying a period of quiet; and my father had to make the best of the situation, however hard it bore on him, a professional soldier. But the peace was of short duration, as the event proved; and I was just turning my seventh year when a new conflict broke out, with Austria, Prussia, and France leading scores of those little kingdoms which were forever fishing in the troubled waters of Continental politics. However, Denmark was one of the few small states to keep her weapons sheathed.

“Under this disappointment my father

chafed—refused to put up with it, in fact. He decided to go abroad to live.

“We moved first to Paris, then to Versailles, where Louis XV welcomed us cordially. A brilliant career was opening before my father, whose bravery in action soon attracted royal attention, when, on the tenth of May, 1745, just as the famous battle of Fontenoy was developing into a French triumph, an English bullet laid him low. To the victory my parent’s gallantry had contributed not a little, and that, too, under the very eyes of the King himself. The latter, anxious that such distinguished service should not pass unrecognized, called me to his presence, and there, on the battle field, elevated me to the rank of royal page.

“This, Monsieur, was the beginning of my real life as a man—a life, I may add, that was for long carefree and joyous. I can still remember the placid delights of those years which all France enjoyed under the Treaty of 1747. At Court, especially, there was one round of festivals, revelries and intrigues of love, wherein I played my part as well as the next one; and I may even say that if today you see before you in my person a hermit, a man, at least, inclined to solitude, the fact must be attributed to the immense, the delicate felicity in which I passed my early days, a happiness whose sheer perfec-

tion has disgusted me forever with the banal pleasures which you people of this modern age could offer me if I cared for them. But why arouse in you the melancholy yearning for those golden days, which I feel? I will pass on, and pray forgive me if I have dwelt too much upon them as it is. I come, then, and tardily enough, to the main point.

“I said, Monsieur, that after 1745, from the date, that is, of my father’s death on the field of honor, I was a page at the Court of Louis XV. In that capacity I was still serving five years later, in the year 1750. Indeed, it was my honor and my pleasure as a royal page, to escort the Maréchal de Belle Isle one day into the presence of His Majesty; the marshall, in turn, leading by the hand a rather handsome gentleman whose name was quite unknown to me.

“‘Sire,’ the marshall began—(How his silky wig shone, as he made obeissance! And to me how glorious his purple coat seemed, thrown up in back by the studded scabbard of his sword!)—‘Sire, I have the honor to present to your Majesty, as your Majesty deigned to command, Monsieur le Comte de Saint Germain, who, beyond all dispute, is the most aged gentleman of your kingdom.’

“My eyes, I remember, turned upon the

count in question. And, quite to the contrary of his introduction, he seemed to me a man in the flower of youth. If he were a day older than thirty, there was not the slightest reason in the world to suspect so.

“It is surely not my place, Monsieur le capitaine, to play the school-master for a man of your evident education. I am certain you are familiar with all that our historians have said about that extraordinary, that superhuman individual, known to successive generations, as the Count of Saint Germain, the Marquis of Monferrat, Count Bellamye, Signor Rotondo, Count Tzarogy, the Reverend Father Aymar, and so on. No, it was rather out of a sense of filial regard than out of any desire to enlighten you, that I forgot myself so far as to recount the detailed story of my first and fortunate encounter with this personage whom I was later to revere as father, mother, master and friend, all in one. To be sure, the intimacy between him and me was not the outcome of this first meeting only. In the ten years following, between 1750 and 1760, that is, the Count of Saint Germain was one of the most frequent guests at the Court of Versailles, and I continued as gentleman-in-waiting to the King.

“Thereafter intrigues and jealousies had their play, and the Count was no longer wel-

come. Unable by that time to live apart from the company of that distinguished genius, I determined to seek him out in his banishment. For long my search was vain. Free Masonry, of which he was the secret General and Grand Master, was keeping him in hiding—as I later learned, in Moscow, where he was plotting a sort of revolution. In despair at last of ever finding him, I abandoned my quest; and, since now the thought of life in France had become intolerable to me, I decided to return to my old Danish home, establish a peaceful hearthfire there, and cultivate the memory of the prodigious friend whom I had lost.

“This I did. I went back to Eckernförde, to my ancestral mansion which had not been occupied for fully twenty-four years.

“It was now the year 1764. Denmark was still at peace, or virtually so. One single army indeed was campaigning in the Duchy of Mecklenburg, under the command of a young fellow, some twenty years of age, who gave promise of a most brilliant career in arms—the Landgrave Charles of Hesse-Cassel, I mean, whom King Christian VII was soon to nominate as his Lieutenant-General.

“The circumstance arose eventually whereby I was called upon to pay homage to His Highness, during a visit which he made, in the inter-

val between two seasons in the field, to a palace of his at Eckernförde. Imagine my delight, Monsieur, imagine my boundless joy, when I discovered, seated on his Highness's right hand and in the place of honor and confidence, the man whom I had everywhere been looking for and had given up for lost. The landgrave himself wept at sight of my emotion. Saint Germain was then living under the name of Tzarogy, dividing his time between the general, whom he was advising as privy councilor, and divers other lords and gentlemen to whom he was lending the assistance of his marvelous science. Prince Orlof, was among these, I may mention, and His Highness, the Margrave Charles Alexander of Anspach. . . .

“My own disappointments, alas, were not yet at an end, however; for, many times, I was still to be deprived of the society of this being who was growing from hour to hour more precious and more necessary to me. But finally my master ceased his wanderings. Prince Charles became, as I said, lieutenant-general to the new king, Christian VII; but, though war now broke out between Norway (a vassal state of ours) and Sweden, the new marshall was frequently at leisure; and this he spent in secret labors at which my master and I often assisted him. Fifteen years thus passed, years as

solemnly and earnestly happy as the days I had spent in France had been wildly joyous. Then a horrible catastrophe came to destroy this long and perfect bliss. I referred casually, some moments ago, to the extreme youth my master had succeeded in preserving despite his unmeasurable age. That youth now suddenly began to depart from him.

“I noticed the change, without daring for a time to make mention of it to him. But his health soon broke down to such a remarkable extent that I could not endure my silence. One day I threw myself at the count’s feet and begged him to be more attentive to his well-being, indeed to make use of his own science in his own behalf. To my relief he took no offense at my presumptuousness, and lifting me tenderly to my feet, he said—in a deep sepulchral voice that froze my blood:

“‘Gaspard, there are diseases against which the science to which you advise appeal is of no avail. My wisdom is helpless, for example, against a secret cancer of which my heart is bleeding: against a will I have—a determination on my part—not to be well again.’

“So speaking, he opened before my eyes a bejewelled medallion which he was wearing about his neck; and in it, fastened to the gold, I perceived a ring of braided hair.

“ ‘Gaspard,’ he continued, ‘I am dying! My mistake was in trying to immortalize, not my maturer manhood, but my frivolous youth. Had I been a wiser man I should have assured—by a wrinkle or two, at least, and a few white hairs—this mortal envelop of mine against the shafts of love; in which case it might surely have become eternal. Now, when you have wholly acquired my Secret, profit by this mistake of mine, and, as my heir and continuator, show yourself worthy of the inheritance!’

“A week later he passed away. To his friend, the landgrave, he bequeathed his note-books, manuscripts, and talismans (all of which were so much Greek to that well-meaning warrior). To me he left what he called his ‘Secret.’

“Monsieur le capitaine, when I began this account of my life, it was to the subject of this Secret, my legitimate heritage, that I intended eventually to come. I have arrived at last. Again I crave your pardon for my great prolixity. But without this long preamble I feared you would not really understand. Now, however, there is no reason in the world why I should not satisfy your curiosity, and, without falsehood, reticence or evasion, answer your query as to what I, my son, and my grandson here are doing with the girl you love, with Madame Madeleine de X. . . .”

XVIII

ONCE more, the Marquis Gaspard drew his snuff-box and opened it. But this time he did not close it again. He held it wide open in the palm of his hand without taking his pinch of snuff.

“Monsieur,” he resumed, “I am far from being a philosopher. On the subject of metaphysics I am quite as unpretentious as you. Nevertheless, you and I know as much assuredly as any man in France about the real nature of that undefinable thing called Life. I say ‘as much,’ though I might well say ‘as little’; for no one ever has known, or ever will know, anything really about Life. At the very most we are at liberty to guess at a few of the phenomena which accompany the existence of living beings on earth and which disappear on the advent of Death. My master, the Count of Saint Germain, never deluded himself on this point. Once he discovered the path we may follow with security, he contented himself with not departing from it by an inch, though the path itself he traversed in Seven League Boots,

one might say, burning a very long candle at both ends! In his case, there was not, as commonplace minds have stupidly imagined, any trace of sorcery or magic. With him it was a matter of solid science, acquired by patient experiment—a matter of mentality, of genius, if you will—nothing more, nothing less, than that. The Secret, the Truth which he discovered, and which he bequeathed to me when he had tired of using it, the Secret of Long Life, the Secret of Never Dying—is a purely natural, a purely scientific affair. You yourself can be judge, *Monsieur le capitaine*.

“Not that I shall pretend to explain, to demonstrate, this Secret to you with the rigor mathematicians and physicists require in their sciences. My master might have presumed so much. For myself, I feel quite too ignorant even to venture on such a task. But, after all, what does that matter? All you want to know is what your friend, *Madame Madeleine de X. . . .*, has to do with it. Am I not right, *Monsieur*?

“Very well, Sir! To the point! We, *Monsieur le capitaine*, you, I, all of us, considered as living beings, are compounds of elements, so many bundles of atoms, or cells, which latter come to life in us, live their lives, and die, to be replaced, in the end, by other similar elements

engendered of those before them. Trustworthy scientists have declared that the bodies we have today do not contain a single particle of the substances of which they were composed ten years ago. This incessant transformation, this constant renewal of ourselves, constitutes one of the distinctive traits of the Life to which I referred a moment since.

“This reconstruction, however, does not take place in the same way in every creature, nor in the same way at all periods in one individual existence. When a child grows, for example, each old atom is replaced by several new ones. In old age, on the contrary, many atoms disappear while only a few successors take their places. Death occurs when the departing elements are no longer replaced at all.

“Monsieur le capitaine, this was the special fact which arrested my master’s attention, and meditation on which revealed to him in the end the Secret I have the honor to be discussing with you—instead of sleeping, as I might normally and reasonably be doing, in some coffin already rotted from the years. And this Secret. . . .

“I will reveal it to you, Sir, and without flinching, dangerous as that may be. You, Monsieur, must I again remind you, are in a position to ask anything of us and always be contented

—anything save one thing, of course; but this one thing is not the Secret. So then. . . .

“If we grow old, or if we die, the reason is that our atoms, our cells, have lost the power to engender others, the others which are essential to the prolongation of life—the reason is that our aged bodies have become inept at a task which our youthful constitutions perform at play, as it were, without effort. Well then, why not pass on a burden too heavy for our years to some other body, whose youth and vigor will do double duty—for itself and us—and quite willingly besides, not even perceiving the extra labor imposed upon it?

“I am not sure than any objection, any reasonable objection, can be raised to that. My master thought not, at least; and I am of his opinion. So are my son and my grandson here. And I take it, personal presumptuousness quite aside, that when it is a case of unanimity among four competent judges, all old men, and consequently the wiser from an experience not unusual but quite unprecedented, our opinion should be respected. I venture to hope, Monsieur le capitaine, that you yourself will share it. . . .

“Madame Madeleine de X. . . ., your friend, is here of her own free will, or virtually of her own free will, for the purpose of coöperating,

generously, in our profit—in the task, that is, of rejuvenating our aged substances which, without her, could not recover of themselves. . . .”

In the pale hand of the Marquis Gaspard the snuff-box cover snapped, with a sharp though barely audible click; and he returned it to his pocket, this time without remembering to take his pinch of snuff.

XIX

I WAS still seated facing my three hosts, and nothing seemed changed between us. To all appearances, I was quite at liberty: no shackles, no bonds, impeded me; I was free to get up, walk around, make a fight of it. In reality an irresistible force, a crushing weight, had settled on my members. I was paralyzed in the most complete, the most atrocious sense of the word. To save my life, to save my soul, to save the woman I loved, I should not, even at the command of God himself, have been able to lift a finger or wink an eyelid.

The Marquis Gaspard finished his blood-curdling reply without interruption from me. I listened on in silence; my face failing quite to show the unspeakable horror convulsing through my inner self.

Now this man—this beast—of prey was silent for a moment. At times in the placid atmosphere of that room I had the creeping sensation of wings whirring about me—the weird ghoulish flight of vampires.

Suddenly the Marquis Gaspard spoke up anew:

“Monsieur le capitaine, I am inclined to suppose that now your curiosity is satisfied; but should there remain some shadow of doubt in your mind still, should there be any point I have not yet made entirely clear, please consider me at your disposal quite. In my opinion—I know it is but a humble one—it were best all around that we understand each other perfectly, leaving nothing, absolutely nothing, in the dark. You will be patient, therefore, if I supplement my recent explanation with a few observations in detail—and kindly pardon me, if I seem to do all the talking. For that matter, I do not insist. You may be bored insufferably for instance. In that event you are quite at liberty to make your escape—you might go to bed again, for one thing. The narrative I have just completed seemed to me essential to an accurate understanding of the facts. On the other hand, what I was minded to tell you now is not wholly indispensable. I should not be in the least offended if you thought best not to hear it. . . .

“To proceed then, Madame Madeleine de X. . . , a friend of yours, is here, as you now know, to work, with the best of her soul and body, for our benefit; and specifically for the purpose of renewing, of rejuvenating, the physical sub-

stance of us three. Now I know how you love this lady; and I am quite ready to assume that you would be interested in hearing more of the marvelous things she does for us, and for which we are indeed her debtors. I should feel remiss in concealing anything on such a delicate matter.

“Monsieur le capitaine, I shall not inflict upon you a review I might make—dull, dry, wearisome it would almost certainly be—of the efforts men—and by men, I mean physicians more particularly—have made to transfuse a life that is young into bodies that are old. I use the word ‘transfuse,’ my mind reverting to a crude experiment resorted to from time to time (with no success worth mentioning) and which consists in a simple transfer of blood from a strong man to a weaker one. Folderol! Balderdash! Charlatanry! What else could you expect from doctors of medicine, so called? Among donkeys your physician is the prize ass! And I cannot understand how your age, Monsieur le capitaine, the Twentieth Century of Our Lord’s era, can take so seriously these fakirs who, in my time, I assure you, were appraised at a far juster worth.

“That, however, is beside the point. I need not remind you—you must surely have guessed as much yourself—that my master made no use of medical devices in arriving at his astonish-

ing results. His pride it was to be a chemist, not to say an alchemist, as he would have said. He was no mere horse-doctor. He was no mere barber. His discerning eye was fixed on the mysterious depths of the test-tube, not on the point of a brutal butcher-knife. And he discovered. . . .

“Just when, I do not know. It is well authenticated that the Count de Saint Germain lived several centuries, a fact explainable only on the assumption that the Secret of Long Life must be of very ancient origin. I stress this fact, for the glory of my master is but enhanced thereby. Our Secret, indeed, has a number of curious analogies with the electric or magnetic appliances the invention of which is the glory of the present age. Just consider then how far ahead of his time this great man was! But in speaking of electricity I am not, believe me, thinking of the primitive tricks that were known even to men of old. No, my master did not waste his time in drawing sparks from a cat’s tail nor in making bull-frogs dance to music. But he did manipulate the philosopher’s stone most handily, and he was able to dispense with mercury when he chose to plate with silver or with gold. I remember that many a time, just in play one might say, he would amuse us by transferring the metal of one object to the sur-

face of another object of a different metal; and this he did by means of electric batteries, of which, precisely, he was an independent inventor; though he used other processes still, quite as far from being supernatural as they were kindred to the marvelous. But he did not stop at so little, for these things were mere child's play to him. I saw him, with my own eyes, one day, take a branch from a rose-bush with two roses on it and one bud, not to mention the leaves, and transport the whole in some mysterious way through a thick partition, in which the doors were sealed, into an adjoining room. Little by little the rose-branch wasted away before our eyes and as gradually reassembled in another place. That experiment impressed me, I can tell you, Sir; though the Count assured me there was nothing very remarkable about it, since any substance could be disintegrated for a certain short length of time into incredibly minute atoms which made light of passing through such coarsely textured obstacles as wooden doors, or brick and plaster walls. 'The time will come,' he used to say, 'when *matter* and *movement*, which, moreover, are identical, can be *exteriorized*, much as smells, sounds, or light are normally at present.'

"It would be scant flattery to your acumen, Monsieur le capitaine, were I now to fear you

had not guessed the general method of our Secret. Just as a mass of pure gold, suitably moistened in an appropriate liquid and acted upon by a current from an electric battery of an appropriate force, may be broken up and distributed toward a mass of plain iron so placed as to be receptive of such action, so a living creature, likewise placed in a favorable environment and subjected to a magnetic energy of proper strength, gives up its cells in certain numbers and transmits them to another living creature stationed at a point where they may be received and assimilated. There, Monsieur le capitaine, you have our 'process'—if I may borrow a term from the jargon of your modern alchemists.

“You must be aware by this time, Sir, that I am seeking to hide nothing from you, that I come down indeed to very perilous details. I will go even so far as to add that the conditions favorable for this operation may be found in any room whatever, provided such room be tightly closed, perfectly silent, and darkened to a half light; and provided also, it be laid on a line from North to South. This latter specification is necessary in order to keep at sufficient tension (by drawing on the magnetic forces of the Earth itself) the magnetic current which,

for its part, any strong and wilful man can find in his own physical being when he so pleases.

“Now, Monsieur le capitaine, I dare hope you have been furnished with all the facts that you desired to know?”

XX

THE invincible, all-powerful clutch which fastened me helpless to my chair, seemed to have paralyzed my tongue and some of the functions even of my brain. I was in full possession of consciousness. I could still think clearly and logically; and I could feel—what despair indeed was mine! But volition, the power to act, had left me; and my combativeness, also, my rage, my fury against these drinkers of human blood, these assassins of the girl I loved, were weakening, vacillating, melting away into a hazy, vaporous, indistinct emotion.

The Marquis Gaspard, after a pause, was again speaking, with that same obtrusive, labored, sinister urbanity.

“Monsieur le capitaine,” said he, “at the risk of seeming intolerably repetitious, I must here revert to something I have mentioned at least twice before, the fact, to wit, that everything under this roof is at your beck and call, without fear or refusal, save one single thing. Eventually, alas, we shall be constrained to broach the painful subject of that single thing, which, to our extreme regret, we shall have per-

force to deny you. Will you not, therefore, carefully examine your mind in all its nooks and corners the better to acquaint us—and as specifically as possible—with all your desires? My honor as a gentleman, they will be satisfied, if the satisfaction be within our power.”

He fell silent, and looked up as though expecting me to speak. Indeed, with the final syllables of his last phrase, a curious, and very complex, sensation began coursing through me. At first, it was a sort of tingling in all my veins and arteries, where my blood seemed to be moving faster as my heart beat with a gradually increasing force. Then I began to understand: little by little, by imperceptible degrees, the control over me was slackening; an influence which my mind could not comprehend was lifting the weight that had settled on my limbs. I was not free, by any means; but neither was I completely helpless as before; so that, when the Marquis Gaspard repeated his question, directly, this time, and without so many mellifluous detours—“Monsieur, what do you wish?”—I was able to answer easily, and with absolute sincerity.

And answer I did—an answer that expressed the deepest, most ardent feelings in my heart: “There is nothing I wish, Monsieur. Kill me, as you have killed the girl I love. But kill me quickly: I am ready!”

In reply the Marquis Gaspard, as he had so often done before, laughed a laugh in that queer falsetto voice of his; and therewith, on the instant, the mysterious weight came down again upon my shoulders, while the clutch tightened again upon my nerves and muscles. Once more I was a prisoner, securely bound, my tongue clinging limp and lifeless to my teeth. Inert, body and soul, I felt the ironical voice of my conqueror again laving me with its scalding mirth.

“My word, Monsieur le capitaine! What are you dreaming of? Badly indeed I must have expressed myself! Are you not taking me for some *feu* Cartouche of the good old days, for some Monsieur de Paris, perhaps? Hah! Hah!”

And this time, as he laughed, he shrugged his shoulders in affected resignation; and I found a certain ironic exaggeration in the sweep of the hand with which he again took out his snuff-box.

“Well,” he continued, “I can see there is no help for it. Another bit of glossing will be far from wasted here. Your pardon, Monsieur le capitaine, if I, who should not, remind you, that the three men you see before you are three of the most reputable gentlemen of the Kingdom of France. This right hand of mine was never soiled with a drop of blood. Count François here, born in 1770, grew up in the days of your

Revolution and was a 'philosopher' of the Jean Jacques style in the days when Rousseau was all the rage. Believe me, what he saw of the France of that time, a nation gone entirely mad, and bent on turning into a slaughter-house, disgusted him forever with Samsons and guillotines. As for the Vicomte Antoine, he came into the world in season to figure among those *enfants du siècle* who borrowed the pen of Alfred de Musset to wring the hearts of an admiring world with words of tender lassitude and languishing despair. Poor makings for a cannibal, in truth, monsieur! No, I can see the effects of the reading people do in these modern days. Too many novels, too many novels! A bad diet, I take it, for impressionable, imaginative minds. Who said a word here about killing anybody? The idea of putting you—or Madame de X. . . .—to death had not occurred to us in the remotest degree. Count François, as I may have intimated, has a bit of the moralist under his skin. Give him half a chance and he starts preaching at you! Well, he will explain, if you choose to ask him, and have the patience to bear the consequences, how wholly improper it would be for men possessing the Secret of Long Life, for Men who really know what Living means, to deprive simple ordinary people of any portion of that brief course which

leads them unfailingly and miserably to the Hereafter. We have the Powers Above to thank, Monsieur, that our Secret, *the* Secret, makes (barring a few chance exceptions, so infrequent as to be negligible), no cruel demands upon us. So far, Monsieur le capitaine, I have added a full century to my appointed years. Believe me, none of those additional days have I stolen from the lives of others. No, we are not of those who kill! Can you, Monsieur, a soldier, say as much? Many young people, to be sure, boys and girls alike, have passed through our laboratory. That I cannot deny. Nor could I swear that they departed thence without leaving something of their ultimate vitality. But, at the worst, their loss was a very slight, a very unappreciable one, Monsieur le capitaine; and this loss I might condone with the reflection that a single extra day of life for an ancient sage like me ought surely be worth some sacrifice—a sacrifice, I repeat, quite exceptional in point of fact, since all of the contributors on whom we draw, having once accomplished their generous task, return safe, sound and happy to their normal pursuits. Your friend, for instance, Madame de X. . . ., is by no means so far gone as you imagine. When, tomorrow evening, she goes back to her home from another trip to . . . Beaulieu, no one

will take the trouble to observe that she is lighter by some pounds than at the time she went away—a relatively few ounces of blood, and bone, and flesh, which we have claimed from her youthful substance. Concede the fact yourself, Monsieur le capitaine: your indignation was a bit excessive. So now, I suppose, we are at the end of our misunderstandings. From what you have just said I gather simply that you have no particular desires except, I dare say, an early solution of your Adventure. In the latter case, Monsieur, we might proceed. What do you say? Shall we look for such a solution in a friendly spirit . . . together?”

Again the iron grasp upon my being was loosened for the fraction of a second; I was permitted to nod in acquiescence.

XXI

THE Marquis Gaspard hitched about in his chair; and, as his body lay back in the deep cushions, I noticed, on either of the arms of gilded wood, a small withered hand, the desiccated skin of which, faultlessly manicured, was as glossy as ancient ivory. The Count François and the Vicomte Antoine, whether of their own accord or in imitation of their respective parent and grand-parent, relaxed into similar comfortable positions, their hands also, broader and less wasted, likewise resting on their carved chair-arms—which they quite encircled, what with fingers and palm. I could not help observing these details; for a clear, definite conviction mysteriously seized upon my mind that those talons, of such innocent and genteel exteriors, had their nails somehow buried in every part of my tortured flesh.

The marquis was again speaking: “Monsieur le capitaine, I consider you an intelligent man; and I will not do you the injustice of supposing for an instant that you have failed to divine the nature of the restriction which I have always been careful to introduce expressly

into all my offers of service and hospitality. The time has come—believe me, I am more pained than you thereat—for us to touch more directly upon this restriction. As I have repeatedly assured you, Monsieur le capitaine, our house is wholly, entirely, absolutely at your disposal; but you will understand, knowing what you know, that you will never be allowed to depart from it. Everything here is yours for the asking, everything! Everything save one single thing: your freedom!

“In thus detaining you against your will, our sorrow, Monsieur le capitaine, knows no bounds, no bounds whatever. I say that in behalf of the three of us; for I know that the count here, and the vicomte, feel the same regret as I. But what else can we do? In our heart of hearts, we regard ourselves as absolutely not responsible for any of the consequences that may result from your visit to our abode. Chance, and your own—very pardonable—curiosity, are to blame. A thousand to one chance—and it went against you! It was your ridiculously unreasonable misfortune to have seen last evening something that no mortal man could be allowed to see: Madame de X. . . on the Col de la Mort de Gauthier. But your bad luck did not end even there. In your rambling search for your lady, it was your second mischance to

come dangerously near our refuge. From that point on we were helpless. Knowing, perhaps, that we exist, knowing perhaps where we live, knowing perhaps the kind of visits we are occasionally obliged to receive, you know far too much, Monsieur le capitaine; for the Secret preserves its efficacy only so long as it remains a Secret. It must, by nature, be the exclusive appanage of a few Living Men. Let the generality of Mortals even suspect its existence, and it is finished. Our Secret, you see, Monsieur, is an essentially aristocratic one. Its exercise presupposes the subservience of a great number of inferior creatures, who must endure labor, suffering and fatigue for the profit and welfare of a few master beings. I need not remind you that the humanitarian prejudices, the democratic sentimentality, of the present age would not take kindly to such a notion. Your politicians, who flatter and fawn on a vulgar demos more vilely than any of my comrades, the royal pages, ever courted the *Roi Bien Aimé*, would tear their hair in oratoric indignation if they ever discovered that for the past hundred and seventy-five years one man has been allowing himself to avoid death in defiance of all equalitarian principles. So much so, Monsieur le capitaine, that we three, among the most well-intentioned gentlemen in the Kingdom, as I

boasted not long since, find ourselves obliged to hide like brigands in this out-of-the-way spot, and behind a labyrinth of boulders, precipices and thickets certain to keep all intruders away.

“In the circumstances, our embarrassment should not be hard to understand. You have happened on us, Monsieur le capitaine, much as a wasp might strike into a spider’s web, tearing everything to pieces. If you were left at liberty to return whence you came, carrying the shreds of our Secret in your pockets, it would be the jolly end of us, now would it not? I am speaking, as you well realize, without a trace of exaggeration.

“Consider a moment, Monsieur le capitaine! Try to imagine the prodigies of prudence and cunning we have had to perform, the limitless sacrifices we have had to make, to ensure our safety and our independence in the various countries where we have had to live. For one thing, we have always been moving from this place to that. The business of a Wandering Jew would be child’s play compared with our many flights and migrations. But the discomforts attendant on such things have been the least of our troubles. Monsieur le capitaine, when my master died, I was still a comparatively young man, and François here was a mere boy. His mother I had married twenty years

before, in France—still young and beautiful she was, and as strict in her loyalty to her husband as conjugal happiness demands—neither too much nor too little, that is. I loved her dearly; and my great joy, at first, was to think of taking her along with me to share the new destiny I had in store. But then I reflected: was it wise, was it prudent, to entrust to a woman a Secret on the keeping of which depended whether I should come to be another Count de Saint Germain, and perhaps, indeed, an older and a more learned one? Could I stake, on a female's discretion and wisdom, the outcome of a game to last for years and years, when winning would make us literally immortal, and a single uncautious word would spell certain ruin? Alas! You understand: I could not! I submitted accordingly, Monsieur le capitaine, to the torture of seeing the mother of my only child perish before my very eyes, while, all along, I could have preserved forever the smile of her lips and the sweetness of her caresses. Such a price the continuance of our lives as Living Men exacted. And twenty years thereafter, my son, in his turn, to prevent the Secret of Long Life from becoming entangled in skirts, sacrificed his wife. Such facts will enable you, Monsieur le capitaine, to estimate the value of this formidable knowledge, which we have pre-

ferred to two lives no less precious, you must admit, than your own. I have said two lives, with a view to a reasonable statistic. There may have been more. A few moments ago you saw how pale and weakened your friend, Madame de X. . . ., appeared. It is no simple matter to give up some eight or ten pounds of living substance to another person. . . . Then, there are the accidents to take account of. . . . We have had such lamentable occurrences to regret, unfortunately . . . though very few, very very few. . . . In any event, you can see that the ransom of our lives must be a heavy one, though a capricious Circumstance has decreed that others should pay it for us. . . . Alas, Monsieur le capitaine! You surely will not be surprised if it has fallen to you now to assume a portion of the cost. . . .

“You must, in short, pay something; and I am certain I can rely, in such a matter, on your liberality as a gentleman of parts. . . . What puzzles me rather is the kind of currency that might be passed between us. . . .”

At this point he broke off, and looked first at the one and then at the other of his two companions, who, first one and then the other, wagged their heads in doubt. A moment or so must thus have passed.

“Monsieur le capitaine,” the marquis sud-

denly resumed; "if we were living a hundred years earlier, in 1808 instead of 1908, our difficulties would be easily superable. For, I must tell you: this is not the first time we have been embarrassed by the inconvenient presence with us of an intruder—living or dead as the case may be. Forgive my using such a term for you; it is accurate, however seemingly discourteous. Yes, I remember, to mention only one such episode, a poor Neapolitan who, some eighty odd years ago, died in our house most inopportunately. We were living in Naples at the time. The police service of the Bourbons was a pretty ramshackle affair; none the less I was afraid of considerable annoyance, should it ever occur to the Gentlemen of the Guard to ask how that particular person happened to be found dead so far from his own home. I decided to anticipate any indiscrete inquisitiveness. A felucca from Malta happened to be lying in port. We went aboard long before any one in town could possibly have begun to work up interest in the death of that unfortunate man. The felucca set sail; and no one found any objection to raise against the departure of three kind-hearted old gentlemen noted for the promptness with which they paid their bills. From Malta we took another boat to Cadiz; and from Cadiz we went on to Seville, where

we were sure no citizen of the Two Sicilies would ever suspect our presence.

“But nowadays, alas, the earth has become much smaller, and the telegraph, especially, has seriously complicated our manner of living. Take your case, Monsieur le capitaine. I have no doubt that in the course of the next few hours, any number of official dispatches will be sent out over all this region, broadcasting the news that you are missing and asking light on the mysterious failure of your mission. There is another difficulty. At the time of our settling here, I was obliged, through the obnoxious provisions of French law, to make a declaration before your magistrates, in order to acquire legal title to this homestead. So you see, the authorities know who I am; or at least they think they know who I am. You can rely upon it: if you were to drop out of sight, an army of detectives would come looking for you, and turn this house upside down from cellar to attic. You know that I am right. Well, there we are, in a blind alley as it were. We cannot let you go away, alive and free, as you came. Nor can we keep you here, a prisoner—or a corpse. . . .”

Again he broke off. Then inclining his head slightly to one side, and pushing his lips forward into a grimace of amusement, he laughed

once more in the same thin, high-pitched, crackling tone.

“I seem to note a movement of surprise in you,” he now continued. “I imagine you are thinking of your friend, Madame de X. . . , and you are objecting that she comes here, goes away, comes back again, and that others, doubtless, of our contributors do likewise without any untoward consequence resulting. And you are right. But do you suppose that she or any one of her co-workers knows the slightest thing about us and about what we are doing, that any one of them is in the least conscious of the philanthropic service he or she is rendering? Monsieur le capitaine, our disposition to solitude has always inclined us to choose very secluded spots for our abode in whatever neighborhood we are living. The road to our door is necessarily a long one, and our guests would have good reason to complain had we not, from the very outset, devised a means of sinking them into an hypnotic slumber which spares them all consciousness of fatigue. On such a system, for that matter, our security itself depends, as you can readily see. By virtue of it, we are able, whenever we set up our household for ten or twenty years in some hospitable region, to survey the inhabitants for their strongest and most robust members, to select, in the end, those

who are freest and most independent in their habits and manner of living. These latter, only, become collaborators in our Secret. And may I, in this connection, reassure you, in case there should be some temptation to jealousy on your part: Madame de X. . . . was not chosen by us for her pretty eyes, though these may, I grant you, be the brightest pair in the world; but because she lives, for most of the time, quite apart from any relatives, and because her country house, situated at some distance from Toulon, requires frequent protracted absences from the city; and her occasional disappearances are not, therefore, likely to cause uneasiness in her husband or in any of her friends. I hope, now, Monsieur le capitaine, that your mind is at rest on that point. . .

“ . . . as I wish mine were on the issue of your adventure! We have reached this conclusion in our talk thus far: that you cannot leave this place alive and free; on the other hand, you cannot remain here a prisoner, and much less a corpse. Oh, of course, we might conceivably take unfair advantage of the situation you are in, kill you, and carry your body to some place where no possible suspicion could fall upon us. But for all you may be thinking or may actually have said, we are not murderers, Monsieur le capitaine, nor anything re-

sembling murderers. For that reason we shall not kill you, even were the temptation to do so to be very great indeed. . . .

“Such being the case, our problem is to discover some way of not killing you . . . a problem which I regard as difficult enough to merit consulting the views of each of us, yours included, Monsieur le capitaine!”

The marquis once more opened his snuff-box and offered a pinch first to the count and then to the vicomte. Then he helped himself; and this time he sneezed, voluptuously, into his handkerchief.

XXII

EACH in turn, at a deferential nod of their respective father and grandfather, first the count and then the vicomte proffered their suggestions; and so long had I been listening to the shrill falsetto of the marquis, that the sharp, low-pitched enunciation of the other two almost made me start with surprise, paralyzed though I was.

“Monsieur,” said the count, addressing the Marquis Gaspard, “you are right on every point; and especially in what you said of the danger we incur from the presence of Monsieur le capitaine in this place—a danger enhanced by the fact that Madame de X. . . . is likewise our guest at the present moment. We cannot think of sending her away before this evening, whether to Toulon or to Solliès. That would expose her too soon to the fatigue of the return journey. She is still extremely weak, and neither you nor I, in the very worst circumstances, would consent to risking an innocent life. Now tomorrow morning, this neighborhood will be full of soldiers—we can depend upon that. For, obviously, Monsieur is very close to the gov-

ernor: his absence will be noticed, and a thorough search made. We have every reason to fear a visit ourselves; and in such an unfortunate event we shall be compelled to conceal two persons instead of one: a double danger, if you think as I think.”

“I do,” said the marquis.

The count bowed and proceeded:

“The path of virtue is not the easiest to follow in a case like this: no end of criminal or treacherous devices suggest themselves for relieving us of our present embarrassment. To mention one: few people in Toulon are unaware of the relations existing between Madame de X. . . . and Monsieur le capitaine. It would be a simple matter to account for his disappearance by turning suspicion upon this estimable young lady. Can there be any doubt of that? Tomorrow police and soldiery will be searching this territory inch by inch. On the Mort de Gauthier, not far from the carcass of Monsieur’s horse—that clue it is too late to obliterate—they find the captain’s lover! Nothing more would be necessary: of course—a “crime passionnel,” served to the taste of the metropolitan press! The work of a jealous woman! The eagerness of the public to accept such an exciting hypothesis would divert all attention from us without fail. And Madame de X. . . .,

mark you, would meanwhile be unable to defend herself from a charge the very monstrousness of which would quite confound her. That unfortunate girl could never explain to herself, let alone to her judges, her incomprehensible presence in such improbable surroundings."

The Vicomte Antoine had raised his head: "Such barbarity, such cowardice, would be worse than murder outright and stain our hands darker than with blood: you would make us the vilest of cads, Monsieur."

There was an abundance of heat in his tone. The count turned toward him and bowed with a nod of approval:

"I agree with you, and no rational gentleman devoted to a life in accord with Nature, would ever allow an innocent head to fall under an unjust punishment. But observe, nevertheless: no court would ever convict the lady on pure supposition; and all direct evidence of a crime would be wanting. . . ."

The vicomte interrupted: "I grant you that a court might acquit, Monsieur; but the public never. And this woman, convicted through our agency of having lived according to her heart, would be the victim of general hostility and opprobrium. Her honor would be smirched forever, and her life ruined."

"That is true," the count again admitted.

The squeaky laugh of the marquis took them both to task:

“Enough, gentlemen! Spare us your preciosities, I beg of you. There you are, at it again, indulging your usual fatuities in behalf of the widowed mother and her ten children! Will you gentlemen never tire of sentimentalizing—playing with those soap-bubbles of yours: Humanity, Fraternity, Love, Nature? Does neither of you see that the security of our Secret is perhaps of more importance than the so-called good name of a woman who has already, of her own accord, made herself the talk of a county? The solution you have suggested, Sir, is by no means unworthy of consideration. I do not, however, regard it as the best. I think that before deciding on any course we should review all the possibilities before us. It is your turn, Vicomte. Have you something practicable to propose?”

The youngest of the three men hesitated. Finally he said:

“May it not be that the solution lies in the very magnetic forces over which we have control? I am thinking of yours particularly, Monsieur, so prodigiously powerful, when you choose to exert them. It has occurred to me that we might send the captain home, free to all appearances, but still retained under such

an influence that every word he uttered would be dictated by us. We could gain some days in that way; and then. . . .”

The smile on the lips of the marquis was almost a sneer:

“Then what?” he questioned.

The vicomte failed to find an answer, and the marquis supplied one for him:

“Then . . . nothing! Where could such a comedy end? How long do you think we could stand the strain? It is no easy matter to keep our hold on an old man ready for the grave. Could we, without a moment’s respite, and till the end of the world, suppress the individuality of a man like Monsieur le capitaine, youthful, robust of body, and strong of will? Nonsense, Monsieur! Utter nonsense! Find something better than that, Vicomte. Come, gentlemen, you have heads! Use them!”

But the count and the vicomte added not a word. The staccato laugh of the marquis alone continued to grate through the silence of the hall.

XXIII

SUDDENLY my flaccid arteries began to dilate again under stronger pulsations of my heart. As had been my experience a few moments earlier, a diffuse tingling spread through all my fibres, and the paralyzing grasp upon me was relaxed anew. But on previous occasions my freedom had been only half restored and for very brief intervals. Now I was free, free from head to foot—a liberty without any restraint whatever; and the sensation of possessing it was destined to endure. I raised my head in astonishment. On my eyes the eyes of the marquis rested; but no imperious commands were emanating from them now.

A temptation flashed across my mind: to leap from my chair, spring upon my captors, and, disarmed as I was, make a fight to the death against them. And a second thought also came to me: the thought of fleeing.

But I contented myself in the end with a shrug of the shoulders. What could I do, after all? Speedier than my flight, more powerful than any violence, the unerring glance darting

from the old man's eyes would have halted me, overwhelmed me—that I well knew. If indeed he was now loosening the unseen bonds that held me, much as shackles are removed from a prisoner once the doors of the gaol are closed, I was in reality no less a captive than before; and any strength I may have had, though I was now ostensibly free to use it, seemed hardly dangerous to my three antagonists.

So I sat there motionless in my chair.

When the marquis now addressed me it was in a very gentle tone indeed.

“Monsieur le capitaine,” said he, “I am sure you are at present in a much more reasonable frame of mind and that you understand perfectly at last the kind of people with whom you are dealing: just plain decent people like yourself—only a great deal older, and with lives, for that reason, necessarily more precious. Yes, that is the whole question, really: to safeguard, first of all, these marvelous, virtually immortal lives we three are living, and then, if, and so far as possible, to do something for you; just as we always do the best we can for the men and women who serve us in the manner I have explained. A simple situation, isn't it? I am inclined to trust your sense of fair play, Monsieur le capitaine. You will admit that we have treated you considerately thus far, refrain-

ing from unseemly harshness even when you had tried our patience sorely. Our desire you see, is to regard you not as an enemy but as an ally, a co-worker, a friend. Fundamentally both you and we have the same object in view. That enables me, without further delay, to invite you to take a part in our deliberations. You have heard what has just been said. Unfortunately no workable plan seems to have come from it. I wonder whether you, perchance, can think of some egress from our difficulties?"

I beseech you—you who read these lines that I am writing, struggling perhaps to decipher the crude scrawling of this pencil now worn to the wood, bear me witness that my Adventure was a terrible adventure, fraught with a horror beyond humanity, beyond life. All that night long—it was my last night, remember—I was not my normal self, but rather like a dreamer caught in the terrors of some ghastly nightmare; and if I chanced, while groping in the depths of that abyss, to forget, for a moment, that I was a man, and was able to think, for a moment, of betraying the cause of Men, of Mortal Men, for the profit and comfort of the Men of Prey, the Ever-living Men, do you who read my full confession, measure my weakness with the measure of your own; and do not condemn me lightly!

Yes, of just that I was guilty! And any crime was in vain.

When the Marquis Gaspard had twice repeated his question: "Can you, perchance, think of some egress from our difficulties," I, yes, I, André Narcy with lowered head and cheeks aflame, made answer. And I answered with these literal words:

"Monsieur, open your doors and let me depart in peace; and let Madame de X. . . ., the girl I love, go also. Give me your word of honor as a gentleman that this lady will never again be called to this house; and I, for my part, will give my word of honor as a soldier, never to breath a word to living person, man or woman, free mason or priest, of anything that I have seen or heard here, or even of your existence!"

The Marquis Gaspard was on his feet almost before I had finished:

"Monsieur," said he, with a wave of the hand, "I congratulate you! That is what I had been hoping to hear! Your proposal affords me unbounded satisfaction: I would fain see in it the beginning of a perfect understanding between us, with promise of the further success certain to spring from such perfect accord."

He sat down again, felt his pockets for his

snuff-box, took it out, reflected a moment, and then, with another toss of the head, resumed:

“Alas, Monsieur, I am deeply pained at my inability to accept, offhand, a proposition in itself so generous. Pray do not mistake my meaning: I have the sincerest regard for your word of honor as a soldier. I hold for it the same high esteem which you profess for my word of honor as a gentleman. Both, we may rest assured, are of pure alloy, more precious than gold, more trusty than steel. I have implicit confidence in you, Monsieur le capitaine, as you will have the charity to believe! But—have you considered carefully, Monsieur le capitaine? The Secret which you would take in trust so courageously is a burden that weighs more heavily than you realize perhaps. What is needed to betray it? A word merely, a single imprudent word! Who, other than a man bereft of speech, could undertake to withhold such a word eternally? Why, Monsieur le capitaine, how can one deny it? Look at the matter as it actually stands! I ask you: do you never talk in your sleep? Do you always sleep out of hearing of others? Can you be certain never to have a fever, a delirium? That might be enough! That might be enough! You can see the point, I am sure: good faith, by itself, has no practical value in such a serious circum,

stance. It is no discourtesy to you if we must reject, to our extreme regret, the offer of a promise which might be dangerous to the honor of the man brave enough to make it—with the most earnest intentions, as I know.”

The old man here bowed to me with a very formal deference. When he proceeded, it was with a change of tone:

“But, whatever the course we are finally to adopt, it would help to know with reasonable accuracy, beforehand, whether we may be exaggerating the probability of immediate danger. Monsieur le capitaine, no one is better placed than you to enlighten us on that detail. Will you not tell us therefore: are we right, or are we wrong, in assuming that, with this coming dawn, a patrol will begin looking for you in this neighborhood?”

Without speaking, I nodded in the affirmative.

“Ah,” commented the marquis, with deep concern.

He sat thinking for some moments.

“Your horse,” he finally continued, “they tell me its carcass is lying out there on the Col de la Mort de Gauthier.”

Again I nodded.

His next words were uttered in a subdued tone almost as though he were thinking aloud to himself:

“So the real search will begin there! The important thing is to have it a brief one. Time is a capital consideration. The speediest solution should be the best. . . .”

He had opened his snuff box, and with one of his fingers was stirring the tobacco about, absent-mindedly:

“Beyond a doubt. . . . The danger will be less in proportion as it be brief. . . . Those people will hunt and hunt, and keep hunting for a long time . . . A long time, except on one condition. . . .”

He looked at me, and once or twice again he tossed his head in his characteristic manner:

“Except on one condition—the condition that they find immediately . . . what they are looking for! What would satisfy them? You, of course, nothing, nobody else—you, alive or dead . . . preferably dead! . . .”

I was certain he was preparing to broach the subject of assassination; and I had quite prepared myself:

“I am in your power,” I observed coldly.

But the marquis frowned and answered curtly:

“Monsieur le capitaine, I thought I had explained to you that we would not kill you even were the failure to do so to cost us dearly.”

He shrugged his shoulders; and then, turning to his two companions, he said:

“I see no alternative: we must organize, stage as it were, some ingenious situation, fit to deceive those investigators, who, for that matter, start with no prepossessions, and are a very ordinary lot of numbskulls into the bargain. It will not be so difficult to arrange something. All we need is a corpse, at the foot of a precipice; a safe distance from here, naturally, and not too far from the Mort de Gauthier. . . .”

Again he relapsed into thought, his eyes fixed on the floor.

But the Vicomte Antoine raised an objection.

“A corpse, yes! But we haven’t one, Monsieur. Where can we get a corpse? Can you be thinking of breaking a grave, somewhere?”

The marquis came out of his reverie, and laughed aloud:

“Antoine, there you are again—the inevitable touch of Gothic! Will you never get cured of your romanticism? What a thrill! A dark night! A cemetery! Three men stealing up to a vault with pick-axes. . . . The idea is not only romantic: it is asinine. Do you suppose the stupidest police sergeant, even, would stop at the first skull and cross bones he came to, and immediately draw up the death certificate

of our friend, the captain, here? And that death certificate, precisely, we are looking for, are we not! For the world, for every living person in it, Monsieur le capitaine must be a dead man, and of a death as simple and as easily explainable as possible. Then only can we feel secure!”

His jocular mood vanished. He looked up at me again with deepest concern.

“Monsieur,” he said, “I am profoundly sympathetic with you! I realize how hard it must seem to lose one’s self—one’s name, one’s professional and social position, one’s very individuality. That, alas, is the lot in store for you! You will be allowed to live—that I have promised, and I reiterate the promise now. But you will nevertheless have, in some cemetery, a grave with a stone and an epitaph upon it, and under the sod, a coffin with your mortal remains. There is no escape from that; and I beg you to be as resigned as possible!”

An icy chill ran the length of my spine. For death I had been long preparing; but I was beginning at last to see that dying was not what threatened me: it was a question of something else, of something worse, perhaps.

The Vicomte Antoine persisted in his objection:

“But those mortal remains, where are we . . .”

The marquis cut the sentence off with an oblique downward movement of his hand and arm:

“Here!” said he.

XXIV

IN the silence which followed, I could hear the violent leap of my heart and feel the drops of chilling sweat as they gathered about my temples. I was afraid, with that indescribable sensation of fear which one has of the dark, or of the ghosts and phantoms that walk by night. The falsetto of the marquis did little to allay my weird uneasiness when his voice again came to my ears. He was speaking to me:

“Monsieur le capitaine, I have been weighing the pros and cons in my mind carefully and thoroughly. But now my decision has been made. From it all our further deliberations must proceed. You, of course, can have no rational objection to it, since you could devise no means for solving the problem before us when your turn came. You will be so kind, accordingly, as to consider the present recourse settled beyond appeal.”

He raised his right hand as though about to take an oath:

“Monsieur le capitaine, up to this day, you have been Monsieur André Narcy, captain of cavalry, staff officer at the fortress of Toulon. You are no longer such: Monsieur André

Narcy, captain of cavalry, staff officer of the said fortress, is hereby suppressed, and nothing can save him, since his life has become a mortal menace to the Ever-living Man. You, Monsieur—henceforth I cannot call you Monsieur le capitaine—will continue to live under such name as shall be pleasing to you; but you shall continue to live here, a prisoner in this house—at least for a certain length of time; for it is by no means a life-long captivity that we are obliged to impose upon you. Our sojourn in this place may be shortened. Out of consideration for you, we will undertake to limit your restraint to a maximum of three years, dating from today. We will change our residence as soon as we may safely do so, without arousing unduly hazardous suspicions. We will take you with us. Then, on any spot on earth which you may designate—we require only that it be distant—we will set you at liberty, gladly, and without demanding any pledge of silence whatsoever from you. Why such a pledge, indeed? Your story, should you tell one, would be that of an unknown adventurer—or that of an imposter, should you have the extravagant audacity to attempt a resuscitation of Captain André Narcy. Thirty or forty months before this time on this 22nd of December, 1908, Captain André Narcy was found dead; and, unques-

tionably identified, was buried with military honors. Such a story, I repeat, and as you know well, would send you to an asylum for a much longer time than the three or four years we ask of you. No, you will be silent without a pledge and silently begin life over again—a new life, which, I trust, will be happy, prosperous, and free from accidents, even from accidents less tragic than the one which has brought your present life to an end this very hour!”

I had listened, with a deathly chill in my heart. The marquis leaned forward toward me.

“Do you accept this recourse—of your own free will?” he asked.

I threw my shoulders back and mustered the little strength that still remained in me. With head high I answered:

“I am in your power. There is nothing for me to accept or to refuse. I have no choice in the matter.”

To my surprise, my answer, easy as it must have been to foresee, strangely disconcerted my prosecutor. I saw him bite his lips, and look hesitatingly first to his right and then to his left. After a time, he resumed, abruptly, and with a curious plaint in his voice:

“Monsieur, I am disappointed in you, and I confess to you quite frankly that this resignation you are affecting does not serve my pur-

poses at all. Remember, if you will be so kind, exactly who we are. In my view, you and I do not stand toward each other in the position respectively of victim and executioner. And you have an absolutely free choice in agreeing or in refusing to submit to what we ask of you."

I was quite unable to fathom the meaning of this man who was addressing me in this incomprehensible language. I made no answer.

"Once more I ask you, Monsieur," he insisted: "Do you consent freely and heartily to the death of Captain André Narcy; and do you consent freely and heartily to survive him, at the simple cost of a few years of pleasurable captivity?"

I made no effort to understand, this time. I shrugged my shoulders and answered bluntly:

"No."

Once and again the marquis tossed his head.

"Monsieur, you are making a great mistake," said he; and his bright, restless eyes swept me with a glance of severe disapprobation: "A great mistake, Monsieur! I am a very very old man. May I plead indulgence for my years and employ toward you the language a grandfather might use toward one of his children's children? You are a stubborn bad-tempered boy—naughty, would be almost the word. You are rebelling petulantly against an inexor-

able destiny which, nevertheless, is deaf to the whimpering of men. Yes, it is childish of you; your conduct is not seemly in a grown man. I hope you cannot be imagining that a simple 'no' from you is going to cause us so very much embarrassment, or that we are going to commit suicide just because you refuse a real favor at our hands! Agreed: we will not kill you, whatever happens. But do not speculate too rashly on the horror of bloodshed which we so deeply feel. You have little to gain from it. You have been able to see from what I have told you how little, on the whole, we hesitate where women are concerned. Nothing would be easier than to sacrifice the so-called honor of the girl you love in exchange for the peace of mind of us three old men. No, nothing would be easier—as the count here explained to you, only a moment ago.”

And at this point he too shrugged his shoulders. After a moment's pause, he resumed:

“What do you say, Monsieur? Shall we stop all this nonsense, and play the game with cards face up on the table? Look here: my idea, as I intimated, is to deceive the civil and military authorities of Toulon, and the newspapers and the public of Toulon, in regard to what has actually happened to you. They will, in other words, believe you dead. Your death certificate

will be duly filed, your obituary written, your grave dug, and filled. In such a case, no one will ever dream of looking for you away off here in this lonely mansion, where you will continue to live, temporarily, the life that we are living—temporarily, I say; for as I promised a bare moment ago, you will be set at liberty again, and as soon as possible, in some distant country. What is there so terrible in all that for a man in your situation—unmarried, without dependents, without serious responsibilities of any kind? Now, for staging the first act of this trifling comedy, your coöperation is absolutely indispensable. This fictitious corpse they are to bury with military honors, honors worthily your due, Monsieur, why—I cannot produce it with the wave of a magic wand over a cucumber, as some fairy godmother might do in a Christmas tale; but I can produce it in a manner quite as satisfactory—only, to do so, I must have your help, a help which, I repeat, must be freely, spontaneously, proffered!”

I had listened I know not whether with greater surprise or alarm. At his concluding words I saw the Count François and the Viscomte Antoine turn with one movement toward their respective parent and grandparent, their eyes aflame with a sudden intelligence as though some revelation which had not yet dawned on

me had come to them. Once more I mustered all the forces of my faltering will; and I said:

“Why all this beating about the bush? You have the upper hand. Why so particular about the precise form of blackmail you will eventually resort to? I have already offered my life in ransom for the life of Madame de X. . .? Do you want me to repeat that offer? Very well! I am still ready. Do your will upon me!”

Several times the Marquis Gaspard waved a broad wide-open hand from right to left, each gesture timed to an exclamation of protest:

“Tic tac too! Did ever you see a worse case of balkiness? Monsieur, for the dozenth time, and as you know perfectly well: nobody but you has raised the question of throat-cutting! No, it’s a simple matter of what you call, with some generosity I must say, the good name of a woman; which presumptive good name is to be saved or sacrificed, as you chance to decide, and at a price of which you are thoroughly aware. However, I will concede a point: once this so-called good name has been saved, I will, if you think it in the least important, add the further stipulation that the object of your concern shall never again be invited to this place, that she shall henceforth and forever be excused from that special collaboration with us which, a few moments ago, seemed to arouse in

you a very understandable compassion. What more can you ask, Monsieur? The question may now be stated thus: will you pay for madame, or shall madame pay for you?"

He had not completed the antithesis before I nodded in assent. The marquis rose: "I thank you," said he with great solemnity. "I have your word of honor. Between a man like you and a man like me that is quite enough."

Meanwhile the count and the vicomte had also risen to their feet.

"Gentlemen," said the marquis to them in a tone of command, "I noticed that you at last had understood me. Be so good, accordingly, as to attend to all the preparations necessary for the work that is now before us. No time must be lost, since the dawn is close at hand. For my part I must rest a moment, to collect myself."

He had stepped over, meanwhile, to one of the *dormeuses* of the complicated backs and arm rests, the curious design of which had attracted my attention when I first came into the room. He sat down, or rather, he buried himself, in one of these chairs. I saw him relax against the cushions, which seemed calculated to fit every projection and indentation of his form.

There he rested, with arms folded and eyes closed.

XXV.

WHILE I waited, seated in my chair, looking on at everything intently, the Count François and the Vicomte Antoine silently applied themselves to a series of mysterious activities. First they took up each piece of furniture and moved it away from the center of the hall, standing the chairs in line against the wall, and leaving the whole floor clear as if in preparation for a ball. Next, and still without exchanging a syllable, evidently repeating an operation learned from long experience, they brought out the horse, or easel, of which I have spoken, and set it up, being careful to adjust it with precision to the longitudinal axis of the hall, at a point about a third way down the length thereof. Next they opened the antique chest, and drew from it a curious object which they handled with great care, carrying it, with visible effort, to the foot of the horse on which they finally erected it in a vertical position. I noted that this object was about as large as an ordinary cart wheel, that it was flat and circular. A sort of lens, I judged it to be, much like the glass reflector of a powerful search-

light. Its substance was not crystal, however, but a material which I could not identify, something translucent rather than transparent, colorless when viewed with even light, but otherwise showing brilliant metallic glints, shading from ruby red to emerald green with a profusion of all the tints of gold. This lustre, moreover, stood out against the colorless background, as if it came from matter distinct from the disk itself, though incorporated in the latter's substance. You are doubtless acquainted with Danzig brandy, a liquor which seems filled with particles of floating gold; or with samples of Leyden ware showing bits of crumpled tinsel sprinkled through the glass. Such was the dish, or lens, in question.

Finally the two old men stepped cautiously up to their respective father and grandfather, still rigorously motionless in his strange *dormeuse*; and avoiding the slightest noise, they slowly, gently, wheeled him towards a point on the floor which I noticed was marked off, with geometrical exactitude, by four plaques of glass—one apparently for each of the four legs of the chair. Indeed, when they had pushed the old man to the square, the count and the vicomte kneeled on the floor to make sure that each castor was in the right position. From all their movements I could see that the operation they

were about to perform was one requiring meticulous accuracy. This chair in place, they turned to the second *dormeuse*, which, though empty, was advanced just as carefully and noiselessly, and its position verified with just as thorough an examination.

Whereupon, the two old men returned to the seats they had previously occupied, now, however, sitting with their backs against the wall and their faces turned toward me. During all this time, I, for my part, had not stirred; nor had I been once disturbed or caused to change my position in the slightest.

I sat there, observing intently. Things were now arranged as follows in the room: the two *dormeuses* and the horse stood at three points on a straight line running lengthwise of the hall. The two seats faced each other, with the horse between them but nearer to one than to the other. Assuming the lens to be a refractor, I concluded from a rough computation of the angles, that the image passing through it from one chair would fall exactly into the other.

However, the Marquis Gaspard, his body still relaxed and his eyes closed, continued to give not a sign of life.

A long silence ensued.

XXVI

A LONG, long silence. . . .

At first I struggled with all my soul to keep cool and indifferent, preserving on my features the mask of disdain which I had somehow imprinted there. But little by little I could feel that the hold I had on my nerves was growing steadily weaker. My Adventure was beginning to show a semi-supernatural aspect the very indefiniteness of which gradually paralyzed my courage as my motor centers had been paralyzed an hour or more before. So much so that eventually I grew alarmed lest my captors perceive the uncontrollable anxiety that was taking possession of me: I suddenly arose, and with the idea of hiding the expression on my face, I walked several steps away down the room.

Still without moving, asleep perhaps, the Marquis Gaspard seemed not to notice. Not so the Count François nor the Vicomte Antoine, however. They, with a perfection of courtesy and with no trace of irony so far as I could see, inquired as to whether I were tired, or indeed impatient.

“Monsieur,” the count spoke up solicitously,

“be so kind as to excuse the slowness of all this. If I have accurately divined my father’s idea, I assure you it is a very bold one, and care in preparation is a matter of unavoidable necessity. We have before us, unless I am quite mistaken, one of the most delicate operations magnetic science knows; and the Marquis Gaspard, with a proper caution, is summoning every particle of energy at his command. Believe me, Monsieur: he will need it all!”

I had stopped, and was looking at the man as he began speaking; but my eyes now turned instinctively toward the strange apparatus which he and his son had but recently put in position on the easel.

“That lens which you are examining,” the Vicomte Antoine explained, “is used for concentrating the magnetic flow on the spot desired. It is made of a special compound invented by the Count de Saint Germain, and it has the power of refracting electrical waves just as glass refracts rays of light. By such inventions and after numberless unsuccessful experiments, the famous count, and my grandfather in his footsteps, were enabled to master the natural magnetism they possessed in their own bodies, and in consequence to obtain results which are rivalled by nothing that your alienists, your psychiatrists—that is what you call

them, is it not?—nor even your wonder-working mediums, have ever dreamed of. You will soon be convinced, I warrant you. The operation that is probably to be tried tonight will furnish you with a prodigious demonstration!”

In spite of my ghastly desperation, I raised my eyebrows inquiringly. The vicomte shook his head, with a significant nod towards his grandfather.

“The marquis did not deem fit to discuss his project with us, nor even to reveal it in any precise detail to you. I should hardly regard myself as authorized to go into the matter more fully at present; but without divulging anything essential, I may ask whether you are familiar with a term from the jargon of the occult sciences—‘exteriorization’? You must have witnessed, at one time or another, the evocation of a so-called spirit by a medium?”

The question seemed so utterly inane that I did not answer.

“I have, anyway,” the vicomte continued, overlooking my silence. “I remember having seen something of the sort with my own eyes. Two fairly skillful performers, one of whom called himself a medium, were entertaining a number of people, myself among them, in a darkened room in Paris; and one day they actually succeeded in producing a luminous

shadow of an approximately human form; and this, they claimed, was the ghost of I forget what famous personage. That part of it was all a hoax, of course; though the shadow itself was not by any means. You could see it as plain as day, and almost touch it. There is no doubt in my mind that the practitioner in question was in possession of some of the same processes which we are using all the time, and got this shadow from his colleague by a kind of 'exteriorization,' as they call it. This, to be sure, was all a very crude affair; but it does suggest some of the things we do in getting our life-workers to surrender a certain number of their cells or atoms to us; and it resembles more closely still the method we shall employ in a few moments . . . but I think I have said too much already . . ."

He stopped, with an expression of mortification on his face; and the Count François spoke up, as though to detract attention from his son's last words:

"Monsieur, it is hardly worth while to discuss that subject now, inasmuch as you will have full light upon it soon. I am going to seize this opportunity to congratulate you. Whatever you may be thinking of your experiences this night, it is really a piece of singular good fortune that has befallen you. Here you are an

ordinary mortal, thrown by accident into the company of the Ever-living Men and forced, by an equally fortunate train of events, to share their lives for a certain length of time. Oh no, I beg of you—do not imagine I am bantering! Just consider! You people can count on less than a hundred years of life; and you are obliged, in consequence, to live in a perpetual hurry, thinking, talking, acting forever in a rush, bolting your daily bread, so to speak. Since you have to live rapidly in order to live at all, you never really know what living means, nor do you ever taste the infinite sweetness that life holds at bottom. Monsieur, the besetting thought that death is nearer by each moment must quite inhibit meditation and soil every leisure hour; and thoughtful idleness I regard as the one true delight, which far outstrips in consoling power the false and disappointing joys of sensuous indulgence. In enjoining on us to perpetuate not our youth but our maturer manhood, the Count de Saint Germain thought he was imposing on us a painful sacrifice that would, however, in the end prove well worth while. Over a long period of years, he himself had never tired of a most stormy voyage on the seas of human passion; and he ended in shipwreck on the shoals laid in his course by a tress of golden hair. I wonder if he ever realized

that he was missing the haven of real happiness through fundamental misapprehension on his own part of the relative value of things? Now to judge by the interest you seem to show in a certain woman—a good-looking woman, I grant you, but noteworthy in no other way that I can see—you must still be ignorant of the fatuity of carnal satisfactions, when these are compared with the joys that purely spiritual pleasures bring—through eyes, for example, that have learned to sense the simple yet sublime beauties of a sky reddened by the setting sun or of clouds touched with silver by a rising moon!”

The Vicomte Antoine raised an arm in a gesture of sanguine enthusiasm:

“The savor of such enjoyments never cloy, Monsieur; and while you are our guest, I hope to have the opportunity of revealing to you two wonders that Mortal Men have never learned to taste: Night, Monsieur, and Day. The age to which you belong has stubbornly and blindly limited its vision to the mechanical arts, seeking an absurd perfection of bodily comfort and well-being which is useless and contemptible once it has been attained. Your generation has quite lost sight of the gratifications that naturally come to life; and, losing these from view, it has of course lost the power to appreciate them. You, for instance, just a few hours ago, were

waiking with me out on the heath. It was raining and the night was menacing with storm. I am sure your mind was engrossed with the slippery muddy path, the cold wet bushes—all the discomforts, in short. Did you once raise your eyes to the romantic splendors with which we were surrounded—those frowning brows of the hills, their crests piercing the pearly mantle of mist and fog in aspiration toward that upper wrapping of transparent silver that Nature throws over her chilly shoulders? . . .”

I listened on in an amazement that for the moment quite mastered my anxiety. These atrocious demons, these vampires, cannibals indeed since they lived, after all, on human flesh and blood—how could they bring themselves to affect such delicate and poetic hypocrisies? And my thoughts went out to all the pitiable victims who entered that accursed House of the Secret, strong robust young men and women, and left it pale, fainting, emaciated invalids; all to the end that three beasts of prey might eschew “the false and disappointing joys of sensuous indulgence” for the higher ones that “purely spiritual pleasures bring.”

XXVII

THE Count François stopped and looked at his father who still sat, or lay, motionless as a corpse in that singular *dormeuse*, half chair, half couch. Had there appeared on those utterly blank features some expression which I had not perceived? The count, at any rate, turned at once toward me, and said:

“Monsieur, we are almost ready. Think again, I beg of you. Is there really nothing you would like before the operation begins? Is there anything we can do for you within the limits you now know? Our earnest wish is to satisfy your slightest desire, if possible; and we hope you will enable us to demonstrate our best good will!”

I was about to shake my head from right to left, in sign of refusal, when an idea flashed across my mind, setting my whole being afire with a sudden glow. I checked myself, my eyes fixed upon my interlocutor, one hand raised, my lips opening to form a word.

“Do not hesitate, Monsieur,” the count encouraged.

“Gentlemen,” said I, with decision, and

sweeping all three of them with a rapid glance, "Gentlemen, there is one favor you could do me, a favor which I trust you will have no difficulty in according, such immense store do I set upon it. Grant me this boon I ask, and I am ready to repay you not with my passive consent merely, but with my most active and sincere assistance in whatever you intend to do with me—be it even against my life. Look, gentlemen: some time ago you allowed me, did you not, to visit the room where my friend Madame de X. . . . is sleeping, perhaps in an hypnotic trance. My desire, my fervent prayer is to see her . . . once more . . . for one last time; but I must see her natural self, awake, that is, conscious, living, so that I may speak to her and hear her speak to me, that I may bid her farewell, forever, and spend one short hour alone, alone, with her. An hour, yes, just one hour. Then . . . I shall be at your service, your man, your chattel, anything you wish, for as long a time as you wish."

I fell silent, crossing my arms upon my chest. Neither the count nor the vicomte replied for a moment; and I could see them consulting each other out of the corners of their eyes. Then, as they had so often done before, they turned toward their respective father and grandfather, and questioned him in silence. Again there was

no change that I could see on that inert and expressionless countenance; and the old man's eyelids remained firmly closed. But the Count François must have seen something that I did not see; for he addressed me straightway and without the shadow of incertitude:

“Monsieur,” said he, “your wish shall be granted. We will do as you propose.”

A thrill of undescribable emotion swept over me. The count meanwhile held his gaze intently fixed upon his father's face, interpreting to me the decision he found written there:

“Monsieur,” he repeated, “we shall do as you propose. We shall have the honor of escorting you to the room where Madame de X. . . . is sleeping. We shall leave you alone with her. As soon as we are gone, she, according to your request, will regain consciousness, and you will be free to converse with her on any subject without any restriction whatsoever. Do not be surprised, Monsieur. During your visit Madame de X. . . . will be her material self, awake, conscious, living, as you have asked. She will know that you are there, and she will be glad to see you. But of course she will still have over her eyes the invisible blinder that we have placed upon them. She will not know where she is, and will not find it extraordinary to be meeting you in a strange room. Indeed it

will not be strange to her. She will take it for her own or for yours. She will, in short, be unaware of everything which the vital interest of the Ever-living Men requires her not to know. Supposing, for example, you were to spend your time and pains in trying to enlighten this beneficent unconsciousness of hers. You will not succeed, I warn you in advance, for, at the end of the sixtieth minute, Madame de X . . . will fall asleep again, as we have bargained, and will lose all memory of this talk with you, which memory will be erased from her mind, rendered absolutely null and nil forever . . . Monsieur, will you be so kind as to step this way? . . .”

He was already on the threshold, and, with the younger man leading, he crossed the same anteroom again. I followed close behind him. I am sure I staggered as I walked along.

Outside the badly jointed door, the familiar perfume that I loved came to my nostrils in warm subtle waves of fragrance. I thought I was fainting as I breathed it in.

“Monsieur,” the Count François was now saying in a low voice, “Monsieur, for the duration of one hour, please consider this your house!”

XVIII

SHE was still asleep, lost in that terrible slumber which, assuredly was more like death than like life. Her black eyelids, her livid lips, her ashen cheeks, her cold flesh, I scanned vehemently for some faint, deep-seated flush that would bespeak the coursing of a little blood, at least, through a few of her arteries . . . In vain! In vain!

An endless minute passed. I had bent forward over the bed to gaze upon her, not daring to stir the coverlets with the merest touch of my fingers. Finally, from her sunken chest the sound of stronger breathing seemed to come; and simultaneously on both her cheeks I could distinguish the pallid but reassuring blush I had waited for, so long, so ardently . . .

What now took place was like a swift, miraculous resurrection. Her whole countenance regained its color gradually, her pulse beat more strongly, her beautiful breast began to raise the comforters in a regular rhythmic heaving. I lowered my head till my face almost rested on her eyelids, my lips ready to welcome

with a kiss the first opening of her eyes; I could feel the vital warmth again returning to her forehead and cheeks. She sighed inaudibly and her lips sketched a smile. I could restrain my caress no longer. It was under a passionate shower of kisses from me that she returned to consciousness . . .

Oh gods of Heaven and Hell! All this was but a few weeks ago! Yet how many ages have died, how many aeons have sunk into eternity, since that kiss was mine?

She said:

“Oh, I have been asleep! . . . And you were here, saucy boy!”

She knotted her silken arms about my neck; and I felt her body—how light, how alarmingly light it was!—stiffen a little as she drew herself up languidly under the coverlets . . .

She also said:

“Dearest, dearest love! . . . Oh, how tired I am! . . . It seems as though I could never again lift my head or stir a finger! . . . Never, never again! . . . But you love your poor little girl, don’t you? . . . Look out, Monsieur! Perhaps your doll is broken! . . .”

She said no more—just then; because my lips had smothered her last words.

As she sat up, I piled the pillows behind her, Her hair of greenish gold poured in a sparkling

torrent down over her body. Her white arms still encircled my neck. She laughed—that laugh of mischievous girlish gaiety which I had always so much adored in her. I released myself from her embrace; and resting a knee upon the bed, and throwing an arm around her wonderful shoulders, I plunged my gaze into the bright lucid depths of her eyes . . . And I forgot, I forgot, everything, everything! . . .

She said:

“Why, my hair is all down! I seem to have lost every comb, every pin to my name!” And she laughed aloud.

I listened with all my soul.

She drew up higher on the pillows, with an effort that brought the pallor to her face again. She cast a nervous glance about the room. I was afraid lest she perceive the bare walls, the grated window, the single wicker chair—afraid lest, perceiving them, she take fright at her strange surroundings, and kill the smile of trustfulness and confidence that lingered entrancingly on her lips . . . But no! The invisible blinder was securely fastened upon her eyes. She saw nothing unusual in that chamber which was our prison.

She asked simply:

“What time is it? Surely not yet seven o’clock?”

When I answered I too summoned a smile:

“It’s early still, my silly, charming, little girl . . .”

With a toss of her head, she shook from her face a few golden tresses that had strayed there—they shone with all the splendor of the sun—and sinking back deliciously upon the pillows, on which her light, her exceedingly light form left scarcely any imprint, she observed:

“I’m glad of that . . . I can stay in bed a moment longer . . . If I overslept, I might be late for dinner . . . How tired I am! If you only knew how tired, tired, tired I am!”

She did not move again, but lay there passively, happily, submissive to the kisses which I rained upon her, though barely pressing my lips to her tortured wasted flesh.

No, I would tell her nothing! I would be very careful not to tell her anything! She did not suspect in the least. And what an immense good fortune that she did not know! Why enlighten her, indeed? No! My despair, my terror, my mortal danger, that must all remain for me alone! And she would never, never know! Since I was alone condemned, I alone would bear the horrors of my destiny. She, free, unknowing, redeemed, would be on her way back . . . toward life! I alone would stay behind, silently turning my footsteps toward . . .

nonentity! . . . But for my silence I would be repaid with one supreme reward; the almost unbearable intoxication of this last love tryst, which would come to me pure, spotless, undisturbed, without a shadow of any kind upon it . . .

She was becoming more and more wakeful, and now was chatting with a ripple of words, words of no import, that entered like little gleams of freedom into the darkness of our prison.

She said:

"Imagine, dearest! At my dressmaker's last Tuesday . . ."

And later on:

"You know very well whom I mean! Marie Thérèse, the ugly thing! I saw her! She was making up to you under my very nose, at the Squadron Ball . . ."

And again:

"The next time we go for a ride . . ."

I, meanwhile, kept drawing my two hands down caressingly over her silky hair and silky arms, hungrily absorbing every possible sensation of that living reality which was in her as her very self . . . And I thought . . . What was I, indeed, but a corpse, listening from the depths of a grave to living beings conversing on the sod overhead . . .?

Yes, a corpse . . .

My gaze was fixed upon her bright sea-green eyes, and upon her delicate, gaily chirping lips; and within me was a scream of desperate anguish!

“You, you are my destroyer . . . you! You crossed my path, and I followed you; and you guided me, almost by the hand, to the yawning gateway of the tomb! Yes, that was true: a will-o’-the-wisp of the deadliest lineage, leading the luckless wayfarer blindly to destruction! And I succumbed! Everything is lost . . . for me! But now . . . can’t you see, can’t you feel, my agony? You are gay? You laugh? You chatter? Is it not written on my face, is it not written in my heart, that I am doomed, that I shall never, never more set eyes upon you? Yes, it is all written there—my love, my fate, my death! And if you fail to read, it is because you know not how to read; and if you know not how to read, it is because you do not love. Oh my dear lost love! Oh my fragile Goddess! You do not love me . . . so you will not miss me, overmuch . . . You will find another man to love . . . Youth will erase unhappy memories . . . You will begin life anew . . . life anew! Better thus! Much better thus! I . . . I love you! I am saving you! I love you!”

And this last phrase I pronounced aloud, as though I were answering in those three words all that she had been saying to me:

“I love you . . . !”

She stopped, and looked at me in astonishment. Then she burst into a gay laugh:

“You love me? You love me? Thanks, Monsieur! If ever you dared say you didn’t . . . !”

To punish me, she drew my head down teasingly, and pressed her lips to mine, in a kiss that lasted . . . that lasted, till I knew no more . . .

When her clasp relaxed, I sat up again. She had sunk gently back upon the pillows.

Suddenly her eyelids quivered.

“Oh!” she said; “how that kiss fatigued me! Dearest, it cannot be seven o’clock? Won’t you tell me that I needn’t get up? I’m so tired! So tired! It can’t be sev . . .”

She collapsed suddenly upon the pillows, her eyes closed.

The door behind me opened.

XXIX

MONSIEUR," said the Marquis Gaspard to me, "it was a great pleasure to be able to allow you this hour you so much desired. I hope it came up fully to your expectations."

He was standing in the center of the large hall to which I had just returned—taller he seemed to me than formerly, with a carriage more erect and eyes agleam with a brighter, more imperious flame.

The candles along the wall had been put out; only the two lamps to the right and left of the fireplace were still lighted, and the Count François was busy lowering the wicks of these.

"Monsieur," the marquis continued, "will you not kindly take your place for what we still have to do?"

He pointed to the deep chair in which he himself had been resting before I left the room.

I was anxious to betray no uneasiness whatever. I advanced without hesitation to the seat appointed and calmly sat down.

"Antoine!" the count called.

I was in that one of the two chairs which seemed nearest to the great lens. Facing me,

and some ten or twelve paces away was the other seat, its arms opening toward me. It was empty. The stuffed cushions on the back of my chair, of the seat, arms and head-rest, seemed to accommodate my body perfectly; so that I was not conscious of any weight or fatigue at all. I stiffened nevertheless when I saw what the Vicomte Antoine was about to do. At his father's call, the younger man stepped forward in my direction carrying in his hand a sort of dark lantern, much larger than the one which had lighted our path over the mountains.

"Look out! Look out, Monsieur!" he called, noticing that I had fixed my eyes in some alarm upon him. "Turn your head the other way, or you may be blinded."

He slipped the shutter over the spot-light aside. I was bathed from head to foot in a harsh raw light which was all the more painful from the relative darkness of the rest of the room. I closed my eyes at first. When I opened them again, I avoided the stream of radiance that was turned upon me, and looked past it to one side, toward the lens and the empty chair beyond the latter.

Despite my efforts to control myself, I trembled, stupidly trembled, at what I saw. The chair was no longer empty; someone, or rather, something, was occupying it — the luminous

shadow of a man seated, a shadow of myself, in fact. Of this I furnished proof at once by raising my arm, a movement which the shadow repeated with absolute fidelity. Now I understood; the hypothesis I had formed when the lens was first brought out was the correct one; the second chair was fixed on the spot where the image of the other chair, passing through the lens, would fall. The moment a vivid light was thrown upon me in that darkened room, my image became visible over there. There was nothing so mysterious in all that so far. I was somewhat ashamed of my first quiver of fright.

After a second or so, the vicomte closed his lantern again, and the image disappeared. Then only did I remember something very strange, which at first had not occurred to me. If the apparatus nearby were an ordinary lens, my image, as I had just observed it, should have been upside down, my feet above my head. Now such was not the case. It was right side up, a thing which I could not account for then, and have not been able to account for since.

Meanwhile, there had been a question, delivered in the shrill falsetto of the marquis:

“Is the image clear?”

The vicomte’s low-pitched voice responded:

“Perfectly, Monsieur!”

I had let my head fall back against the prop

behind it; and it half buried itself in the upholstery, which sustained its weight so evenly and firmly that I am sure I could have fainted and yet still have kept to the same position without bending my neck. The field of my vision was proportionately reduced, however: I could see no one now except the Count François, who was still watching his lamps, turning them by this time so low that a faint blue flicker only was visible around the wicks.

The marquis asked another question, and this time of me:

“Monsieur, you are well seated in your chair, quite comfortable, quite relaxed? It is very important that you should be, I caution you!”

I tested the springs and mattressing:

“I think I am all right,” I answered briefly.

As I replied, I touched my fingers to the covering of the *dormeuse* about me. It was not satin, nor velvet, as I had supposed; but a kind of silk so closely woven that I guessed it to be for purposes of insulation. Leaning over I now noticed also for the first time that the four legs of my chair were shod with glass.

When I sat up again, I saw the Marquis Gaspard standing in front of me.

“Monsieur,” said he, with the very greatest gentleness in his manner and tone of voice, “Monsieur, the dawn will soon be upon us. We

can delay no longer now. You are quite sure you have no objection to our beginning?"

One last wave of anguished rebellion gathered in my throat, and choked me. Nevertheless, I shook my head impatiently, to indicate that I had no objection whatever.

"That is better than I dared hope," the marquis exclaimed; "I cannot tell how grateful to you I am!"

He was looking at me with an emotion that quite surprised me. Visibly affected, and with some hesitation, he resumed:

"Monsieur, there is one thought which I cannot bear your having even for a single moment: the thought that you have fallen, this night, into the hands of heartless, inhuman men."

I stared at him coldly without answering.

"The operation I am about to try on you," he resumed, "is something absolutely new. I advise you with the utmost frankness that it is a very dangerous one, though it is not, unfortunately, in my power to avoid it. The best I can guarantee is that you will not suffer much pain. To add just one more chance that the issue will be favorable, I have decided not to put you to sleep; though the experiment conducted under such conditions will cost me a far greater effort, and much more physical suffering. But if you are awake, with your nerves

and muscles at normal tension, you will be better able to withstand the loss of substance you must undergo."

He inclined his head to one side, his cheeks resting on three of his fingers.

"I wonder . . ." said he, in a voice somewhat changed in tone.

"I was just thinking," he began again. "Without any doubt you have papers on your person addressed to you under your name, your former name, that is . . . Yes! And a pocket book perhaps? . . . Exactly . . . Would you be so very, very kind as to entrust them all to me? . . . They might interfere with our results . . ."

Without comment, I unbuttoned my coat and thrust a hand into my inside pocket. I found there my card case, with a number of visiting cards, my road maps, two or three blank envelopes, and finally, crumpled through my haste in putting it away, the letter—the letter of the colonel of artillery. I handed them all to the marquis.

"I thank you!" said he.

The fold of his thin mouth grew deeper, and his tone was now one of great solemnity:

"Monsieur," said he, "everything is ready now. My last request is that you be kind enough, in view of the fact that you will retain your con-

sciousness, to relax completely, not only every sinew of your body but every tension of mind and will. Try to play 'dead,' if I may say such a thing. Play you are sound asleep. Notice, Monsieur, that I attach great importance to these suggestions, which, you can rely upon it, are made in the best interests of us both."

I acquiesced with a slight arching of my brow.

He saluted me with his most correct and formal bow:

"That is all, Monsieur," said he; "Farewell!"

XXX

HE had disappeared.

But a moment later I was conscious of his presence close behind me. I knew that he was standing there, his eyes fixed upon me; for between my neck and shoulders I could feel a weight, an impact, like the one I had experienced when the Vicomte Antoine found me lying on the heath, and the one with which the Count François welcomed me on my entrance into the House of the Secret . . .

Like these, I say . . . but no! The present pressure was something incomparably heavier and more forceful—a veritable succession of hammer blows descending upon me with a violence that left me bruised and dazed.

Then suddenly . . . everything began to go round and round—an overpowering dizziness assailed me. The lens of the golden sparkles, the armchair opposite me, the clock in the corner, the antique chest against the wall, all seemed to be caught up in a cyclonic whirl of which I was the tottering, collapsing center. In spite of the downy prop behind my head and the cushions that contained me all around, I seemed

to be falling, falling, or soaring, soaring; and my frenzied fingers clutched the arms of my chair, which, to my sense, now plunged into bottomless depths, now darted upwards to impossible heights, rocking frightfully meanwhile and even turning completely over and around. A measureless void was all about me, and my single intelligent thought was one of surprise that I was not hurtling into this gulf of nothingness.

An atrocious torture, but a short one! A deadening stupor came over me progressively, first relieving and finally overcoming my dizziness. My sensation now was one of extreme fatigue, more exhausting than any I had ever before experienced. My head especially seemed emptied of all its cerebral substance as a result of the first shocks I had received; and it lay helpless, lifeless, in its hollow formed in the upholstery. A whimsical interest in what time it might possibly be came to obsess me. I remember that I could hardly move my eyes when I tried to turn them toward the clock; and if I did succeed eventually in focussing them on that point, I could not read the clock's hands, so dark and murky had my eyeballs become, so insensitive my retina.

A curious tingling began at the ends of my fingers and toes, and spread upwards into my

hands and arms, and into my feet and legs. It was like the beginning of a cramp.

But the cramp did not come. What I felt rather was a kind of chill. But neither was this a clearly defined sensation, so rapid, so confused, were the changes and variations in my impressions. It was, on the whole, as though my body were disintegrating little by little, being torn apart, filling meanwhile with a strange liquid, lighter than blood, in which all my organs, freed from their muscles and tendons, seemed to be afloat and drifting.

The conviction came over me that I was about to die. . . .

.

It were better not to resume my story!

My pencil has been lying idle for a long time. Here on this marble slab is the black-bordered register. I hesitate . . . I cast my eyes around. . . .

The noon-day sun is gilding the tips of the cypress trees, while through their stiffened branches the winter wind is playing fitfully. Not a cloud is visible in that cold blue sky. Despite the torpor that besets the arid marrow of my bones, I feel almost a thrill of joy at the splendor of this last day of mine. . . .

Yes, it were better to stop my story here!

Why write on? No one will believe me! In-

deed I myself almost doubt the reality of this fabulous, this impossible, this incredible experience! If I were not here in this place, if I could not read the fateful, irrevocable epitaph graven on this stone on which my elbows rest—if I could not run my palsied fingers through this long snow-white beard—no, I would not believe, I would not believe! I would say rather that I were dreaming, that I were raving in some ghastly mad obsession.

But the proof, the proof is there! I cannot hold my peace! I must finish the narrative I have begun. All men, all women—my brothers and sisters—are in danger! I must save them!

O you who read this my confession, this my last will and testament,—for the love of your God, if you have one, do not doubt me! But read, understand, believe!

.
Yes, I thought I was about to die.

The strange tingling, now the only sensation which I could isolate with any distinctness, was running through my whole body, from the tips of my toes to the tips of my hair. It was no longer like the first symptoms of a cramp, as it had been at the beginning. No, it was something more regular in beat, more enthralling in power. It caused my mind to revert to Madeleine and the morning rides we used to take

together; to our picnics in the forest clearings, to a fondness she had for burying her naked arms in the ground so that I could compare the feeling of the smooth warm sand with that of her smooth warm skin. Through my half-opened fingers I would strain the minute grains and as they fell they made a faint continuous sound that I remember for its peculiarity. Such a sound I was hearing now; but it came not from between my fingers, but from under my skin, from inside my flesh—the murmur of an invisible sand which my veins and nerves were sweeping along their channels in a full, regular, unbroken flow, from my heart and my other internal organs toward my hands and toward my feet. This strange flood became a rushing torrent about my wrists and ankles, and around the joints of my fingers—narrow passages which confined, condensed, cramped the current. But it went beyond my own extremities, far beyond! How far I could not say. I know simply that my fingers and toes were at once moist and chilled, like vessels of unglazed pottery which give off water drop by drop and become ice-cold from evaporation. . . .

And all the time, on the back of my head and between my shoulders, I could feel blow after blow in furious succession, blows which I know came from the all-powerful eyes of the old man.

quis, who stood there relentlessly raining them upon me.

I grew weaker still. A few moments before I had tried vainly to look at the clock against the wall. Now even my eyelids were paralyzed. I could not close my eyes nor could I turn them. They were glued inexorably upon the objects directly in front of them—the translucent lens (the golden glints in its substance glowing now mysteriously); the armchair where, for a second, I had glimpsed the seated image of myself; beyond, a bit of white-washed wall—all blending in a blurred whirling confusion.

As second followed on second I thought I could feel more and more of my life flowing silently out of my wasting body. . . .

Then suddenly, something extraordinary occurred; and I was so shocked by it that I managed, calling on I know not what reserves of energy, to open my eyes a little wider and to clear their vision by winking my eyelids several times.

In the chair where I had before seen my own image seated, now I could see, clearly, distinctly, beyond any possible doubt whatever, beyond any chance of its being an hallucination—I could see with an unspeakable overwhelming certitude—another image, likewise seated, another

image also made of light, but of a different kind of light—a sort of fluctuating phosphorescent shadow which was gradually taking form . . . out of nothing. . . .

XXXI

. . . taking form from nothing. . . .

At first it could hardly be said to exist at all . . . something more tenuous than a shadow . . . as transparent as glass . . . all the particulars of the chair visible through it—covering, head-rest, arms and back . . . something formless, colorless . . . a sort of pallid luminousness hazy in outline, changing in texture, suggesting the vague fluorescence in a Gessler tube. . . .

Yet something, nevertheless, something more certainly real than the image I had seen shortly before—the image of myself refracted through the lens . . . something material, tangible, ponderable . . . as I could sense, as I could feel, as I knew with a conviction that excluded all doubt . . . something living, perhaps!

Living, certainly! Yes, something alive; for now, inside the tissue, inside the substance of this luminous something, I thought I could see . . . I could see . . . I could see with absolute distinctness . . . a sort of web, a veritable network of veins and nerves . . . outlined in light . . . in light brighter than the light of the

thing itself . . . and along those nerves and through those veins, rushing, streaming, leaping in regular pulsations, a phosphorescent liquid . . . all coming from one center . . . and that center . . . a heart!

I could see . . . but the testimony of my eyes was nothing . . . my senses, my feelings, my very consciousness . . . told me, convinced me, assured me, that that shadow was alive . . . Of its life I had the same perception that I had of my own life. I could feel the beating of that heart, as I could feel the beating of my own heart; and I could feel the streaming of that phosphorescent blood in those arteries of light as I could feel my own red blood in my own arteries of flesh. . . . Then at last I knew. . . .

I knew that that Something, that that Presence, that that Being was taking form, not from nothing, but from me. Not only was it from me; it was my very very Self.

From the depths of my weakness and of my agony, from the abyss of mortal terror in which my consciousness and my intelligence had been engulfed, that one persuasion rose—a clear, clear comprehension of all that had been explained, suggested, threatened in words that had hitherto seemed so obscure to me. . . .

Yes, that Shadow there was I, that Shadow sitting in the chair before me, that Shadow of

pallid light that was already losing its transparency!

.

I lost my hold on the wisp of sentience to which I had been clinging. Weakness overcame me. Sight faded from my eyes, and hearing from my ears. A black opaque veil descended over me, enshrouding me, burying me. I became as one dying, dying . . . dead.

.

Later, I know not how much later, but after, I think, a long, long time, I came to myself again.

And when I came to myself again, all the life that I had lived before I sank into that deathly slumber, seemed to have receded into a past infinitely, eternally remote, a past more ancient than all the ages.

A pair of cold hands was pressing on my temples. I could feel drops of water trickling down my face. They came from a wet handkerchief that had been drawn tight across my brow. I knew that the Count François was standing in front of me, and that he was working to bring me back to consciousness.

A sigh forced its way through my lips. My eyes opened. I stretched my fingers that had gripped the two arms of my chair. . . .

The count removed his hands from my temples.

He wiped my forehead dry.

He went away.

Then I saw. . . .

I saw, in the chair opposite me, seated, a Man.

A Man like me, exactly like me, like me to the last detail: myself.

I looked at him, and I was not sure whether he or I were I. And I was not sure whether we were two men, or one man in two persons. I raised—how painfully!—an arm; and I succeeded in raising it because now it had become as light as gauze. I raised an arm, I say, to see whether the other Man, the other I, would be forced, by what I did, to do the same, to raise an arm that is, the arm that I raised. But no! I moved: and he did not. So then . . . there were two of us: I and a Man: two different men, separate, distinct Beings.

Distinct, separate, and yet, unquestionably, two parts of one whole, a single whole; and all my flesh, all my wasted rarefied substance cried out desiringly toward that other flesh, that other substance that had been torn from me, “exteriorized” from me.

Another Man: a Man, and not a shadow, and not a ghost! No spectral trappings; no sheets, no shrouds! Clothes! A riding suit, exactly

like my riding suit. I looked at the clothes I was wearing. I had just bought them new. Now they were old, worn out, threadbare . . . As old, as worn, as threadbare as I myself!

Alas! Alas! Why, why am I writing still? I know that you who read will not believe . . . But I tell you I am not insane! Would a mad-man talk as I talk? Another thing: I am about to die; and a man does not cross the threshold of Eternity with falsehood on his lips . . . Two good reasons for not doubting my veracity . . .

Alas! Alas! I know . . . I know . . . why should I go on . . . ?

.

Nevertheless. . . .

XXXII

. . . the Man got up from his chair and walked toward the door.

I saw that He walked with my walk. When He arose, I had felt in the muscles of my hips and back, a sudden stiffening as though I too were making an effort to rise from my chair. Each of his strides thereafter caused rapid contractions of the muscles in my thighs, in the calves of my legs, at my ankles.

He stopped at the door into the anteroom, and stood there with his hand on the latch.

And I heard the voice of the Marquis Gaspard speaking, a voice I could scarcely recognize, so faint, so broken, so husky had it become—a breathing rather than a voice.

It said:

“The papers!”

The towering figure of the Vicomte Antoine came between the Man and me. Nevertheless I could see, I know not how, that into the Man’s pocket the vicomte was slipping my purse and the letter from the colonel of artillery.

“He has them!” the vicomte said.

The Man opened the door and went away.

.

Now I say that when He was in the antechamber, separated from me by a thick partition, I could see Him still . . . not exactly through the partition; nor could I, exactly, see Him with my own eyes . . . but, as it were, with another pair of eyes which went along with Him, and did not leave Him any more than my eyes left me . . . With these latter eyes I could see Him more clearly, more distinctly than with my own eyes.

And when He had left the antechamber, and was out there in the garden, under the trees of the thickly matted branches, I could see Him still. And when He had left the garden and was out there on the heath—there where the plants and trees grew sparse and stunted . . . I could see Him still. . . .

Once more, for one last time, the falsetto of the Marquis Gaspard grated on my ears; and I sensed that he was mustering all the fainting sonorousness of his throat and lungs for a last irrevocable declaration.

“Monsieur,” I heard him say, “Monsieur, that Man you saw, that Man who has just departed . . . be my witness that I created Him . . . as God created me. And having created Him I have the same right to destroy Him that God has to destroy me . . . if He is able!”

The voice died out. . . .

XXXIII

AND I could see Him still . . .
He was walking rapidly, slipping through the underbrush with surprising ease. And I thought of Madeleine, whom I had seen six hours . . . six centuries? . . . before . . . gliding in that same way over the same rough ground.

The dawn was streaking the eastern sky; but the valleys behind the screen of mountains were still sunk in darkness. Nevertheless I could see Him still . . . Though to see Him was like touching Him. Those supernatural moving eyes with which I was following Him step by step, those miraculous eyes attached to his flesh doubtless because his flesh was my flesh . . . those infallible eyes which made me see with absolute distinctness . . . were like two hands . . . feeling rather than seeing.

The Man was getting farther and farther away, walking very rapidly now. Around Him I could dimly see the enormous blocks of stone with the smooth hewn faces, those monoliths of geometrical design, rising naked from the soil,

which had astonished me on my own passage through them. In that labyrinth the Man did not hesitate at all, but hurried on his way with the same certainty as before. . . .

Around my ankles now I could feel the scratching of the juniper and the briar . . . as though it were I and not He whom the thorns were tearing . . . And as He kept walking, I grew fatigued, more and more fatigued, till a sharp pain caught me in the joints of my hips and knees. . . .

The Man was beyond the labyrinth of stones, advancing along the deep ravines and precipices which also I recognized from having followed the same path six hours before. Not far from there, indeed, the spotlight of my guide had lighted the faint trail, his cane beating to right and left to open the way before me. Those very brambles that were now scratching the Man's legs and my legs. . . .

.

My cries of "Mercy!" "Mercy!" had worn me out.

.

The Man stopped suddenly.

The glow of sunrise had now climbed to the zenith. The whole landscape was bathed in a

pale but brightening light. A clump of tall ferns appeared, masking the precipitous wall of a ravine.

The Man stopped, folded his arms, and leaned forward. I leaned forward with Him.

A precipice was there, the precipice on the brink of which I had earlier been moved to terror. I recognized it, as I had recognized the labyrinth of monoliths, the region of ravines and precipices, the thickets of juniper and briar. I recognized the same smooth wall of the chasm, the same white stones of the river bed over which the deep black water was rushing in a torrent . . . And I recognized the same nauseating chill of vertigo.

In the strip of bright sky along the eastern horizon, a first splash of red, the color of blood, marked the oncoming of the sun. . . .

I was striving to master that nausea, that vertigo, when an atrocious snap of all my muscles hurled me violently from my chair, hurled me into the air as a diver is tossed from a spring-board. Weak as I was, exhausted, prostrate, my muscles contracted with such desperate violence that I was thrown up up through the air, to fall two, three, four yards from my chair, which was thrown over backwards by the push I gave it.

I fell . . . I fell . . . my head and arms

thrown forward . . . and I lost consciousness again.

I lost consciousness again; but not before I had had time to see the Man likewise hurled headforemost into the abyss, where He fell, and fell, and fell, to be dashed to death on the white boulders under the black rushing water . . .

XXXIV

THEREAFTER . . . I know not what . . .
I knew nothing more. . . .

Morning . . . morning, and raining still. Through the grated window of my bedroom-prison, a sticky viscous light was making its way. I was lying on the bed. When I awakened, I tried to rise on my elbow to look around me. I could not: I had not the strength.

But suddenly I could see . . . I could see, in another place. . . .

Rushing water . . . tall green reeds . . . moss . . . a lofty, vertical wall of rock . . . white cobblestones washed by a tumbling stream . . . and, on the jagged point of a boulder, a corpse, my corpse, me. . . .

I could see that my clothing was soaked, the water covering my breast and shoulders, and filling my wide opened eyes . . . But I did not feel the cold liquid contact of the stream, nor the chilling north wind, laden with rain, that was beating upon my back and legs which were out of water on the narrow bank of the torrent there. I could feel nothing. I was dead. I mean to say that the Man was dead, that Man

who was, and still is, I. I could see a large red hole in the back of his head—the wound made by the rock He struck, the wound through which his life had spurted away. . . . The back of my head . . . of me who was lying there on that bed in that chamber . . . pained me terribly.

.

So I lay there, inert. Several times I tried to move. Move I could not; nor was there anything I could do. Through the half-opened window the resinous fragrance of rain-soaked fir-trees came. For a moment, they entered the room—the Count François and the Vicomte Antoine, I mean. They examined me, felt my pulse, my legs and arms, the back of my head. But soon they went out again. I was left alone.

.

All that I have just been telling even then belonged to the distant past, a past fabulously remote.

I was lying on the bed, inert, watching my dead body awash in the stream. I tried to remember what had happened. . . .

Yes . . . I fell . . . I was bending over the edge to peer into the depths of the chasm . . . and a heavy blow struck me between the shoulders . . . one of those blows such as I had sev-

eral times received between the shoulders . . . and on the back of my head . . . blows from the overwhelming gaze of those old men . . . of the old marquis . . . which had pounded me to pulp.

So then, I was watching the dead body . . . my dead body. . . . Carrion already old! Flies swarming on and over it. The torrent foaming around and against it—and running water erodes, dissolves, disintegrates! . . . Yes, carrion indeed! . . . The coffin maker must come soon, or little will be left for him! . . .

.

Carrion already old!

But not so old as my living body—that too was old, limitlessly aged!

Was I as old as this, a little while before? Or had the sun merely stopped in the heavens? And if so, how long? For many many years? I could not say. . . .

.

I remember, yes . . . I fainted . . . I lost consciousness completely. When I fell over the cliff . . . my head and my hands struck hard on the tiled floor . . . the Ever-living Men probably brought me to the room and put me on that bed. . . . Perhaps the rushing water of the stream, or the rain, or the winter wind turned

me so old. . . . One cannot help but change . . . lying out in the weather! . . .

Old! old, old! And older, older, every minute, every second!

My hand went to my chin . . . A beard was beginning to appear there. . . . It was growing rapidly . . . a gray beard. . . . As I passed a hand over my temples, I could feel deep wrinkles there.

Three times the door of my chamber opened partly, and I could see the faces of the Ever-living Men peering in at me attentively. On each occasion I feigned sleep, closing my eyes . . . But not entirely. . . . My eyelids were far enough apart for me to spy on what they did. . . . They did nothing. . . . But this I saw . . . I saw that they were astounded . . . plainly, evidently astounded at the age, the sudden age that had come over me. . . .

.

I lay there inert. . . .

What time was it, I wondered? What day of the week? What month of the year? And the year—was it of the era of our Lord?

My beard was gray at first. Now it had whitened. It had grown broad and long. . . . Thus do beards and hair grow on the bodies of the dead, I thought. The flesh seemed to have

left my hands. Through the dry darkened skin that covered them I could feel brittle knotted bones. . . .

Was the sun setting? It was growing dark in my bedroom-prison. Only a faltering light was now making its way through the grated window. And the water rushed foaming, whirling along, black and green, around my corpse . . . softened the latter seemed . . . mushy, gluey, loathesome. . . .

.

Yes, night was coming on. . . . Again the Living Men entered to visit me . . . the father and the son I mean. . . . The grandfather was not with them. . . . He was out of sight and hearing. . . . They came and stood at my bedside, looking at me for a long time, visibly preoccupied, visibly alarmed. . . .

They went away again, and still without a word. On the tripod candlestick, the candelabrum of the three crossed lances, three candles were burning brightly now . . . three points of flame for the three long shafts. . . . Darkness was creeping down the chasm. . . . The water was moaning black in the on-coming night.

.

Ho! Ho-ho! What was that? Torches in my chamber! And voices shouting! Ah no!

Not in my chamber . . . down there, along the stream . . . up on the cliffs, above the chasm . . . Down there, of course! What could I have been thinking of?

Torches on the brink of the abyss. . . . Faces peering into the black void. . . . Uniforms! Red trousers, blue coats. . . . And a stretcher. . . . A good idea! A good idea! . . . Of course! Of course! For me, for me!

Voices calling. An oath or two. A voice louder than the others bidding these be silent. I heard everything distinctly. Yes, every word.

"But I see him, I tell you! Look, there he is! Down in that hole! Gotta get down there someway!"

"Watch your step, boy! What a hole!"

"What the hell! I done worse places than this before. . . . The Devil roast my soul! Stinks a bit, this fellow! Whew!"

"Aw go on, what are you giving us!"

"But I say, Sergeant, he's rotten!"

"What do you mean, rotten! Can't have been there more than twelve hours!"

"All right. . . . I can't say how long he's been here. . . . But I know rotten beef when I smell it. . . . Guess it's from being in the water! Say, just chuck that piece of canvas down. . . . We'll pass it under him and draw up the four corners. . . . This is no man . . .

just soup! Easier to spoon him up with a ladle!"

"Damn it, man . . . what have you found? Somebody else? Take a squint at him. . . . We've got to get the right man! What's he got in his pockets?"

"Sticky damn mess! Whew! But here we are! Our man, all right! Yes! Identification card! Other stuff with his name on it! And here's his revolver! Our man, Sergeant, no doubt of that. How about that rag! Sending it down?"

"When you get him ready, you give the word and we'll haul up!"

"Righto! One, two, three, and you pull! . . . Well, I'll be damned!"

"What's worrying you now?"

"Why this here corpse! Weighs about an ounce and a half!"

"What's that? Lord, if he's as far gone as that. . . . Say, give a look around! Maybe you've left some on the rocks, a leg or an arm, or something!"

"No! Got everything, Sergeant, head and all! All right at the other end?"

"All right here!"

"Well then up she goes!" . . .

"And now we're off. . . .

.

“Hey, don’t shake the thing so much when you walk!”

“Oh rats! Hell of a lot this bird cares whether there’s springs on his hearse!” . . .

.

I lay there inert. . . .

I could feel the pressure and the scrape of the canvas on my head, and legs and arms. . . . The litter went along jostling me . . . I could see everything, clearly . . . the flickering of the torches there, and the gleaming of the candles at the points of the three crossed lances. . . .

Total darkness outside! . . . Not a ray of light coming through the grated window. Not one last trace of twilight on the mountain trail. . . .

The canvas tightened, and closed my eyes. There on the heath a shroud of canvas! There in my room a shroud of slumber! Sleep! Another death! . . .

XXXV

DAWN again. . . . I cannot see the new morning light; but I am conscious of its approach. The grated window is still dark; but I am sure the night is ending. Through the thick panes of glass, I feel a chill, the harbinger of day.

The three candles have burned low on the tips of the three lances. Their wicks have curled in upon themselves, sinking into the last drops of molten wax. Only a faint uncertain flame is sputtering from them now and that bit of light threatens to go out at intervals.

.
Sleep seems to have done me good, giving me back some strength, however little.

“Could I sit up now, if I tried?”

How long have I been here? Let's figure it out, from the beginning, from the beginning of my Adventure! Or rather, no . . . let's go backward from today . . . Today, yes . . . sunrise . . . there was a sunrise yesterday . . . cold and rainy. That's one day . . . the day when I grew old so fast . . . I got this way yesterday, between dawn and twilight! . . .

The night before that, night before last . . . I came to this House, the House of the Secret. . . . Last night, and night before last. Yesterday between. . . . Two nights and one day, in all. . . .

One single day . . . yet how deep these wrinkles, how withered the skin on this aged face of mine! And these bristles on my face . . . on my cheeks and chin . . . bristles white as snow, white as hoar-frost! One day for them to grow . . . just one day . . . but a day that lies heavier than a century upon my soul! Who will ever believe me when I tell this story? No one! No one!

Could I sit up, if I tried? But first, I must get rid of this sheet that's tied around me. . . . Trusses me all up, and I can't move. . . . The sheet? Where's the sheet? Here's a sheet; but it doesn't seem to be troubling me. . . . Where's the . . . ah, yes . . . it's the sheet on Him—on the Man, I mean. . . . They have swathed Him in a sheet. . . . I can still see. . . . I see. . . . So naturally . . . natural, isn't it? . . . I get things mixed a little. . . .

.
Dawn . . . no doubt about it now . . . the oblong opening of the grated window is pale with light.

. ,

I did not hear the door open . . . I was caught by surprise. I had no time to close my eyes.

There they are again, the two of them, the Count François and the Vicomte Antoine. They are looking at me . . . And I can easily see, see as easily as yesterday . . . I can see they don't know what to make of it . . . don't know what to make of me, that is.

.

"Monsieur, be so good as to get up, I beg of you." It was the Count François who spoke.

And I arose, without the slightest difficulty. I was weak, very weak indeed, but light, ever so light . . . as light as the air about me . . .

The Count François spoke again:

"Monsieur, my father is very tired today; he is in no condition to leave his room. For that reason my son and I have come to ask you to go with us to him."

I followed them. . . . What difference did it make to me whether I was in one place or in another?

.

The old man, the Marquis Gaspard, I did not see. . . . A portière of antique silk was standing in front of his bed, there in his chamber. Of the bed I could see the four columns of carved

wood which supported the canopy. It was a square bed, without curtains. . . . That was all I saw. . . .

But I recognized the queer falsetto of the marquis, and the marvelously gentle and persuasive tone his voice could assume, when it was not hardened with wilfulness or soured with irony.

The Living Man began to speak. I stood in the doorway listening . . . And as I listened, this worn-out memory of mine, a memory so wasted, so decayed that one by one all my recollections of the good old days have fallen away as dust from it, took in his every word so deeply, so burningly, that I shall remember all he said till my course is wholly run.

He began to speak. He said:

“Monsieur, I had greater hopes of my own magnetic resources and of your powers of resistance. I cannot say I regret having done what I did. . . . I did my duty. . . . Our security, our peace of mind, our probable immortality could be conserved in no other way. Those at any rate are now adequately safe-guarded, at the price simply of a somewhat greater effort. But I should be much better satisfied had the experiment cost you a fatigue as great as mine, without drawing so deeply on your vital reserves. To be sure, I warned you that what

we were about to do might prove extremely dangerous. I feared for your life especially when the moment would necessarily come for breaking the magnetic bond that connected you with the Being I derived from your substance. I foresaw also a great and cruel suffering on your part when I should kill, as I was obliged to kill, this newly created Being. Now those two shocks you withstood marvelously, Monsieur; but only to fall quite unexpectedly for us, into the particular state of languor and exhaustion in which I see you now. Monsieur, I am immensely, immensely sorry; and I trust you will understand that, had it been within my power, I would have been only too glad to leave you in a much stronger and sturdier state of health!"

A pause . . . I drew back a step, with the idea of returning to my room. But the voice began again, in a slower and more solemn tone.

"Monsieur, since things are as they are, the simplest course for you is to bow to the inevitable. But I venture to point out that the present situation, bad as it is, is not without its advantage for you. The objections we were obliged to put forward originally to your immediate release obtain no longer. A favor we could not think of granting to the man you were yesterday at this hour—a man robust of

body and vigorous of will, we are only too happy to accord to the man you are today—an aged invalid, broken in body and weak from more weaknesses than one. . . . Monsieur, you are, from this moment, free, a freedom without any qualifications or restrictions whatsoever. As soon as you choose to say so, my grandson will have the honor of showing you to our door. You may go anywhere you wish. We ask only that you refrain from mentioning to any living soul the things that you have seen during your stay in this House. I am sure you will decide to say nothing of them.”

Still I stood there listening. Somehow I was not at all surprised at this offer of my freedom however unexpected. I stood there listening; and I could feel the words I had heard sinking deeply into me, eating their way into the substance of my brain to remain there with indelible fixity. . . . I stood there listening. . . .

Ah yes! I understand, I understand! From what I have been through, my will, my intelligence, my reason, have all been rarefied, depleted. My head is half emptied, as it were; and these sentences that are being addressed to me, these orders that are being given me, this password of silence that is being graven eternally upon my memory, all dictated by another will, another intelligence, another reason, are

to be substituted in my brain by what is no longer there, for what has been taken away, and made to fill the intolerable hollowness of my skull! . . .

The falsetto voice concluded:

“For the rest you have our promise . . . Madame de X. . . the girl you love, left our abode last night. . . . She will never again be recalled to us. . . .”

Madame de X. . .? The girl I love? . . . I love? Ah yes, yes, yes! I had forgotten! You see, I’m an old old man and my heart is empty too . . . sucked dry, impoverished! I’m an old old man! Many things have changed in me . . . Madame de X? . . . Ah yes! . . . Madeleine! Madeleine will never be recalled! Yes, of course. She will never come back here again. . . . As we agreed.

The falsetto voice fell silent with two words:

“Farewell, Monsieur!”

All was finished!

.

At the door, the outer door, of the heavy oaken panels studded with iron nails, and which had just been opened . . . on the highest of the eight steps leading down from it . . . the Count François and the Vicomte Antoine likewise said to me:

“Farewell, Monsieur.”

.

I crossed the garden, my feet treading and crushing the tall unmown grass, my head grazing the thick matted branches of the pine and cedar trees.

The gate was open.

I hurried through it.

And now I was out upon the heath, walking indifferent to direction save that I turned my face toward the brightening dawn. . . .

XXXVI

I WALKED all day long, from the blue twilight of morning to the red glow of afternoon, following a route which I am sure I could not find again. I know simply that it was always straight ahead. And I felt no fatigue until after I arrived.

That was late, very late in the afternoon. Straight ahead I walked continuously, not knowing whither I was bound, with no idea that I was going anywhere. Then suddenly I noticed that I was on a broad high-way, and in front of me to left and right some houses came into view.

Beyond them, a bridge, a draw-bridge. I recognized Toulon, Toulon and its ramparts.

Through the arching gate the sun shone red as blood.

Yes, it would soon be evening! A sudden weariness came over me, and my feet began to lag on the dusty road. But I went on, on, on, not knowing or caring whither, just going on as iron goes toward the magnet. . .

The town finally!

On my right a shop!

At my side an old old man, the picture of poverty, near-sighted, ragged, bent, with long white hair and a long white beard. I stopped, and he stopped too.

Ah yes! I understand! This old man beside me is I—myself, reflected in a mirror of the shop! . . .

Farther along, the crossing of two streets.

Aha! A house that looks familiar. My house—the house where I used to live!

So that was the goal toward which I had been going all along unconsciously! My legs seemed suddenly paralyzed, I could go no farther. I leaned against a wall there where I was; and I gazed, and gazed, with all my eyes. . . .

XXXVII

WITH all my eyes, I say. . . .

The street was full of people, crowding sidewalks and pavement, edging about this way and that and talking in hushed voices. Most of them were dressed in black. A goodly number of military and naval men in parade uniform were standing to one side, grouped around some higher officers whose plumes I could distinguish over the heads of the throng. Among them a tall impressive personage, with a grand cordon on his breast. A noble face of regular outlines! Ah yes! My admiral, the governor! Vice-Admiral de Fierce!

A Cross, with priests behind it. The red cauls of the choir boys stand out against the surplices and albs of white and gold. A canon's gown is fidgeting nervously about in the company of clergy. . .

Farther on, a squad of colonial troops, drawn up in line, their guns at rest. . . . They are waiting for something, apparently. . . .

Spectators looking on from the windows and down from the roofs and balconies of the houses. . . . Flocks of urchins climbing pillars and

posts, seeking points of vantage. . . . But there is no laughing nor shouting. The crowd is in a serious, earnest mood, or is trying to seem so.

All eyes are on the door of my house, which is heavily draped in mourning. A shield of velvet has been set up above the casing and on it I can read two initials in silver: *A. N.* Of course: *A. N.*: André Narcy! That's what they must stand for.

Of course! I understand! My funeral! Of course!

Here is the hearse, slowly drawing up as the crowd divides before it. The horses are heavily caparisoned; on the four ebony columns that adorn the coffin-rest, four heavy plumes are waving. And oh, how many wreathes! Ten, twenty, thirty of them I can count, all of them bedecked with the tricolor of my country! On each an inscription in letters of gold. I cannot read them at this distance. Perhaps, later, when they pass this way. . . .

Ah! . . . What's the matter now? The crowd is all astir. . . . They are probably bringing out the body. . . . Yes, there it is . . . the hooded bearers are coming down from the front door. How fast they walk! Not much of a load after all. . . . I rise on tip-toe to see better. . . . My coffin is of the flat topped kind common in the South of France! The wood cannot be seen.

They have draped it in a heavy cloth. . . . Here are some other men in hoods. . . . They go up to the hearse and place on my coffin a military cloak of mine—light blue—then a cavalry sabre, with its scabbard; and these clink as they are laid one across the other. Of course. . . that's the custom at military funerals . . . my uniform and my sword! I suppose my Distinguished Service Cross is there. . . . I cannot see it. . . . There is hardly time to look at everything. . . For . . . something else I see . . . yes . . . with those other eyes of mine, those moving unfailing eyes that can see through walls, and rocks, and trees. . . . They can see just as well through the boards of a coffin. . . . Yes, I see, I see perfectly well!

Oh! Oh! Oh! What horror! What horror!

.

A blast of trumpets. . . . The cortège moves. . . .

Leading the way come the priests chanting the ritual . . . the ritual of the dead. . . . Then eight officers, the pall-bearers of honor. Then the soldiers. . . . At last, the hearse. . . .

Oh, careful, careful, please! The springs of the hearse creak over the rough pavement! Oh, careful, careful, please! You are jostling me too hard, too hard! It is a poor miserable

corpse you are carrying there. . . . It must not be treated so! Look out! Don't you see there, under the hearse? The coffin is leaking! Black drops are oozing out and falling one by one upon the pavement.

.

The crowd moves off behind the procession.

Now they have turned the corner . . . on the way to the church . . . and thence to the cemetery. They seem to be hurrying . . . yes . . . because night is falling fast. . . .

One by one the windows close. The street is empty now.

.

I remained where I was, my back still propped against the wall. My weariness overcame me suddenly. My legs gave way at the knees. I slipped slowly to the ground.

Yet the determination to go on arose within me. I got to my feet, somehow. I crossed the street toward my house! Toward my house—of course! Where else should I go, except to my house?

The front door had been left open, the heavy black crêpe dangling around it. I reached the threshold! I stopped.

There in the hall-way stood a little table covered with a black silk tablecloth. On it was

an ink-well, a pen, and a heavy funeral register. Through the open door a draught was coming strong, blowing the black-bordered pages over one by one.

I turned them back, and found the frontispiece.

It was covered with hastily scribbled signatures. There my friends and messmates, along with many strangers, had written their names, as the custom is. Yes, and heading them all, was my name, the name I had formerly had, that is. It was not written, however, but penned in print:

MONSIEUR CHARLES-ANDRÉ NARCY

CAPTAIN OF CAVALRY, D.S.C.

Died the twenty-first of December, 1908, in the thirty-third year of his age.

I picked up the register and hid it under my clothing—the threadbare rags that had once been my riding suit.

And I went away!

I went away. Why not? This house belonged to Captain Charles-André Narcy—the man who was dead. . . My house was somewhere else . . . obviously . . . somewhere else.

I went away.

.

And I too walked rapidly, outside in the street. . . . Rapidly, yes; though I staggered at every step from sheer exhaustion. . . .

The street was . . . no . . . it was not quite deserted. . . . There, on the sidewalk across from me stood . . . a man? a woman? Someone! Someone who was standing motionless in front of the house, and looking at the door that was heavily draped in mourning. . . .

A man? A woman? A woman! A good-looking woman . . . well dressed . . . a single piece dress of a light color. . . . She was carrying a muff, a big fluffy muff that completely swallowed her small hands . . . a muff of ermine. . . .

I knew the woman. Of course! It was she . . . Madeleine. . . . I knew her very well. But, you understand . . . I was dead, was I not? Besides, I was very, very old. . . . Surprised more than moved. . . . In fact, not at all aroused . . . my emotions! Just surprised! But very much surprised!

Anyhow . . . I would just walk by her . . . curiosity merely. . . .

Yes, she, beyond a doubt. . . . Her eyes were glued to the door of mourning. And I could see . . . that was strange! . . . why, she was weeping, weeping . . . great silent burning tears!

Weeping? That was strange! I hadn't ex-

pected to find her weeping! Oh, for that matter . . . a woman's tears!

All the same, I felt I ought to do something. . . .

With a moment's hesitation I stepped up to her:

“Mad. . . .”

She started from her grieving reverie, saw that I was there, swept her great muff across her tear-stained cheeks. . . . Then she felt around inside the muff with her fingers, tossed me a handful of coins . . . and fled. . . .

XXXVIII

AND I fled too.

There was no doubt after that! I was dead! Very very dead! More dead perhaps than He, than the other Man, whose corpse I see, I persist in seeing there inside its coffin . . . a terribly wasted corpse, frightfully decomposed. More dead than He, because He does not know that He is dead; while . . . I . . . I . . .

Furthermore it was not his funeral they were celebrating; it was mine. . . . I am the man those tears were for . . . and those flowers, and those uniforms, and the hushed voices of the multitude . . . all that fascinated gazing at my decoration, my shoulder straps, my sabre . . . there on the coffin. And those same people are now shivering out there in this cold of a December evening . . . to pay their respects to . . . me . . . to me . . . not to Him.

And I should be there too . . . with them. I must hurry. . . .

.

The red of the sunset is turning to lavender . . . a color of death and mourning. . . The leafless sycamores along the boulevard are

spreading on that sombre sheet of flame the black lace-work of their twigs and branchlets. At the zenith a depth of emerald green is growing deeper. . .

Is there something beyond death, I wonder? Something? Anything?

No! I cannot believe that possible! I can see that corpse too well . . . that corpse, in its coffin. . . .

.

A great crowd around my grave . . . almost as great as the throng in front of my house. . . . It is only a short walk from town . . . the graveyard. . . .

No, the ceremony is over. . . . The sexton is filling the grave. . . . I can hear the gravel as it strikes my coffin. . . .

It seems to be all covered now. . . . I walked too slowly. . . . But I was very tired. . . .

The earth they are throwing into the hole. . . . I can feel it heavier and heavier upon my chest. . . . Six feet deep. . . . I never knew it could be so very heavy!

Now everything is over. The grave is filled. . . . The people are going home.

Home? No, I shall stay here! Where have I to go? This place here, henceforth, is home for me . . . my home!

XXXIX

NOW all is written. I have told my story. Here my pencil rests on this flagstone, this lid of shale that covers my grave and already bears my epitaph. My pencil. . . . I laid it here. It is worn to the wood. And I have closed the register. All its pages to the very last are covered with my cramped close-scribbled writing.

All is written. All—everything! And everything I was in duty bound to write—for men and women—my brothers and sisters—are in danger though they know it not. And I had to write . . . because my tongue is tied . . . paralyzed, petrified in my mouth . . .

All is written. You who read what I have written know the truth . . . for the love of your God, if you have one, do not doubt my word . . . but understand, believe. . . .

The sun has vanished below the horizon. Night has come. . . . My last night. . . . Yes, death will come to me ere long! My life has run its course. Its lamp is going out, because the oil has burned away!

On this long polished flagstone which has

been my writing table and on which my elbows rest I can still spell out my epitaph, though the light is failing:

Here Lies

CHARLES-ANDRÉ NARCY

Born April 27, 1878

Died December 21, 1908.

December 21, 1908 . . . or January 22, 1909. . . . January 22, 1909—that's today! Just a month . . . no, not quite a month . . . a month less one day. . . I have been here on this tomb, on my tomb, waiting for death, my second death. . . .

A month. . . One month. . . And all the while my eyes have been gazing down under this flagstone . . . my eyes? those other eyes, I mean . . . which see . . . which insist on seeing . . . implacably . . . gazing down under this flagstone upon a coffin . . . my coffin. . . . The coffin is quite new and undecayed. . . . But it holds only a skeleton . . . a naked skeleton, without clothing . . . its clothes . . . my clothes, were far too thin . . . they fell to dust immediately. Nothing except the bones are left; and they too are all but vanishing. On them, however, I can see something . . . the letter of the colonel of artillery . . . they buried

it by mistake with the corpse . . . it is still quite legible. . . .

Yes, a skeleton . . . a skeleton about to fall away to dust . . . nothing but a skeleton. . . How can I continue living if I am nothing, after all, but that skeleton plus this ruin of wasted flesh and bone that has collapsed on this grave here? Impossible, assuredly! Impossible, fortunately. . . .

A month . . . one month! The earth came up around the edges of this flagstone . . . so heavy that it sank into the loosened ground. . . . Some workmen came and levelled the mound again, tamping the earth down under the stone . . . so heavy the stone . . . and heavy the earth under it. . . . Oh, my tired body cannot support such burdens longer . . .

.

Tomorrow when they come to bury me they will put me in another grave. . . . And I shall have that other earth and another stone to bear! No man surely was ever tormented thus!

.

The sun is sinking again . . . In the west the sky is reddening . . . as red as it was the day of my funeral. . . .

The weather is clear. . . . Not a single cloud disturbs the even azure of the firmament. . . .

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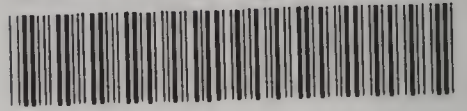
234 THE HOUSE OF THE SECRET

The winter wind has fallen and the branches of the cypress trees have ceased their murmuring. . . . A gleam of blood-red light is striking on their black tips. . . . Over all the heavens and over all the earth a great and sombre beauty glows. . . . Splendor and Serenity . . . reaching even into my soul. . . .

Farewell. . . .

FINIS.

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